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Issue 176

ANIME'S HOTTEST FEMALE DIRECTOR / BLAZBLUE / ERASED / TAKASHI OKAZAKI INTERVIEWED / SWORD ART ONLINE: ORDINAL SCALE / MOSO CALIBRATION TOUR REPORT / POKÉMON MOVIES

GIRLISH NUMBER

FACT VERSUS FICTION IN THE WORLD OF WORK

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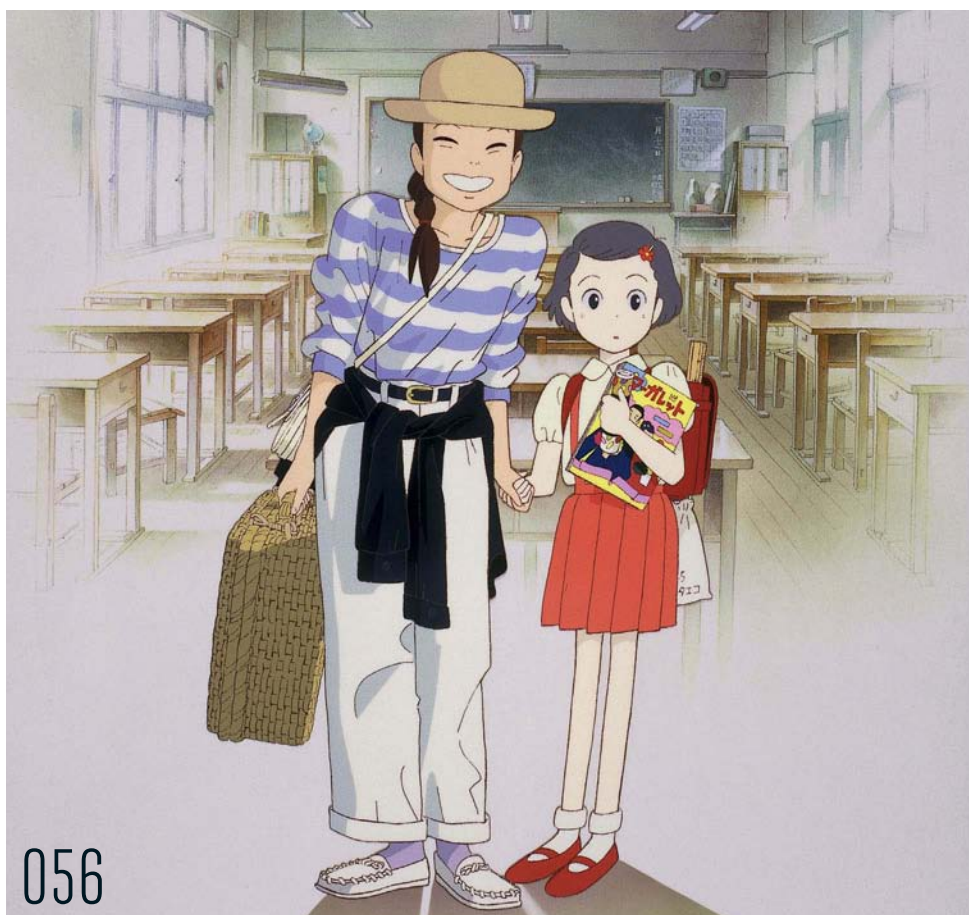
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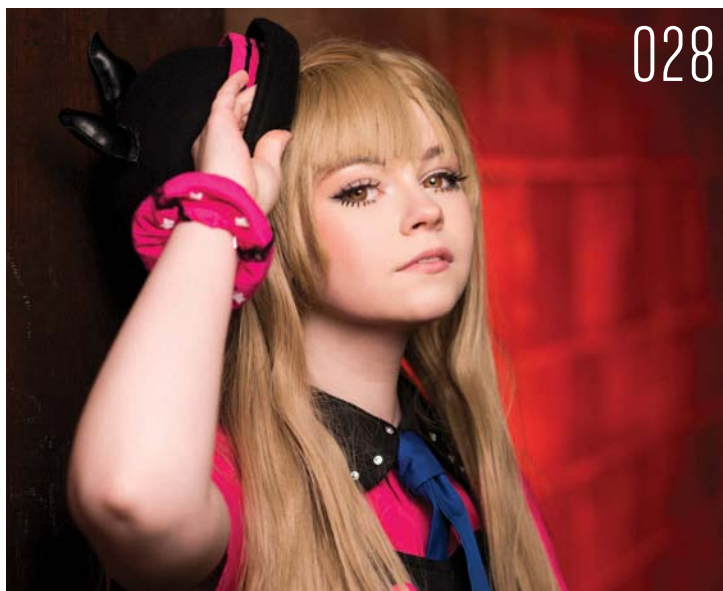
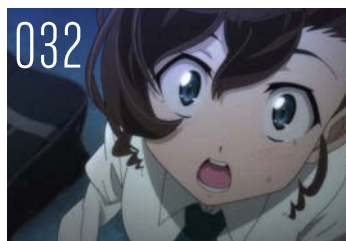
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Our extract this month is VOID, by an English mangaka living in Japan!



WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 176 of NEO! This month we've made good on our promise of a massive tribute to the late director Isao Takahata, which you can read on page 056. Written by Andrew Osmond, it's a look back on a rich and varied career, and a celebration of Mr. Takahata's incredible achievements.

Jonathan Clements also chimes in on the subject with a critique of the obituary industry over on page 020.

Elsewhere in the issue, we have a great flipper feature about PQube's upcoming *BlazBlue Cross Tag Battle* game, including a rundown of some of our favourite characters on the roster. We also have an interview with the creative team from *Batman Ninja* over on page 076. I popped in to the screening of the film last month and I have to say, even after speaking with the screenwriter Kazuki Nakashima, director Jumpei Mizusaki and character designer Takashi Okazaki, I'm still not sure why there were four Robins... But you know, *Batman Ninja* needs to be watched with a laissez faire spirit, preferably with a drink in hand, which is my way of saying it's utterly bonkers and a whole load of fun. Okazaki clearly had a blast working on the designs of some of DC's most iconic villains, and Joker and Harley Quinn were practically made to be anime characters.

We also have an interview with Mari Okada, the director of the wonderful *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*, on page 044. How fabulous to see a female director making such a splash with her debut movie – let's hope we see plenty more from here in the future.

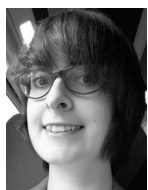
Until next time!

GEMMA COX, EDITOR



MEET THE TEAM

LEEANN HAMILTON



"What inspires you? What are your favourite creators' touchstones of inspiration? This is often a good couple of questions I ask

myself before I start working. Another is what a creation is missing, visually or textually. Teaching myself a lot more."

TOM SMITH



"I've joined a local *Pokémon Go* gang. It's the most excitement I've had this year! Meeting a bunch of strangers round the back of

a kebab shop for a quick gym raid before all departing and going back to our lives. I'm living *Fight Club*."

DAVID WEST



"It was a pleasure to talk to Mari Okada this month about *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*. And what a time to be alive

when Yeon Sang-ho's latest film *Psychokinesis* pops up on Netflix! The revolution will be streamed."

JONATHAN CLEMENTS



"Very excited to see the covers for the first six episodes of the *Death Note* audio drama series I wrote last year. Recording starts

imminently, although I won't be able to understand it because the initial production will be in German!"

MITCHELL LINEHAM



"The new anime season is here, and I've mostly been engrossed in Rooster Teeth's *RWBY*! I'm also

honoured to write the lead feature on how anime depicts real-world jobs for NEO, and I hope you do enjoy it."

ANDREW OSMOND



"In this issue, I review the last half of the excellent *Erased*. I like the anime ending, but if you find it unsatisfying, Netflix offers a

Japanese live-action TV version which has a far longer last act, reportedly much closer to the source strip."

JACOB BONIFACE



"I've been getting my teeth stuck into the new *BlazBlue*, and checking out some of the characters and new features of *Cross*

Tag Battle! Now I'm on a real fighting game kick, so I'll be dusting off some of the old favourites!"

ADAM MILLER



"Golden Week started yesterday and the roads are jam packed. Queues emerge for even the most mundane

attractions, but for homebodies like my family it's a time to relax and catch up on movies we've missed."

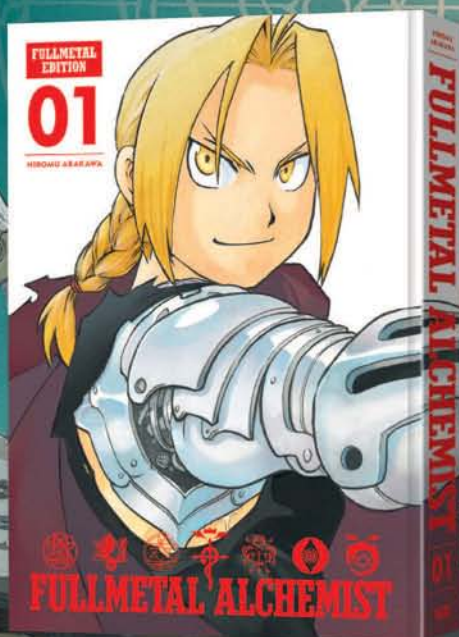
ALCHEMY TORE THE ELLIC BROTHERS' BODIES APART.
CAN THEIR BOND MAKE THEM WHOLE AGAIN?

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GIRLISH NUMBER

The Fantasy and Reality of Working in Japan's Entertainment Industry

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM

WHILST CLOCKING IN as part of a cyber-crime law enforcement agency, or as the pilot of a mecha, or even as a magical girl might be a familiar sight in anime, there are just as many titles that revolve around the workings of real professions.

The likes of *Girlish Number*, *Shirobako*, *New Game!*, *Love Live!*, *Perfect Blue*, *Bakuman* and others focus on different roles in various entertainment industries. But how many of these are accurate, and how much is just part of the dramatic exaggeration we'd expect from fiction?

CREATIVE STRESS

Girlish Number follows Chitose Karasuma, an aspiring voice-actress, as she struggles to find a role that has more than one line per episode. The show goes into detail about how voices are acted and recorded, as well looking at the politics behind the scenes. There's even a focus on the jealousy that's sometimes generated between voice actors, and the show also delves into the issues created when roles are adapted and expanded, as the cast is expected not only to voice characters, but also to participate in live song performances, attend events and do meet and greets with fans.

The stresses and pressures of managing talent, catering to the producer's whims despite their lack of understanding that although an idea may make money that doesn't mean it's feasible, and learning that your dream job requires an incredible amount of effort are all running themes in *Girlish Number*. Whilst there's always a bit of artistic licence in any show, *Girlish Number* certainly doesn't shy away from depicting the voice-acting industry's troubles. Not all anime are quite as honest about their depiction of their respective industries, though.

New Game! is about an all-female studio creating their latest video game, and it focuses on various aspects of development such as artwork, 3D modelling, marketing and management. The show errs on the lighter side when it comes to depicting the hardships of the industry, only briefly touching on the various stresses involved rather than making them a consistent part of its narrative. There are moments

when the story brings up upcoming deadlines and how the team are in a fluster to meet them, but it's all quickly glossed over when much of the work ultimately continues without any notable hindrance. Season two steers even further away from the realities of creating video games, opting to flesh out characters rather than focus so strongly on their jobs and their downsides.

The gaming industry is notorious for the pressures put upon the employees. 80-hour work weeks and hectic crunch periods might sound like a nightmare, but they're a reality for many, and *New Game!* does its best to dodge many of these issues. After all, doing so certainly makes for a much more light-hearted and fun show!

Even when the show tries to take a progressive look at the industry, it falls short. Eagle Jump, the games developer that Aoba Suzukaze works at, is comprised solely of women. This rather unusual fact is brought up in the show, but it's brushed off fairly quickly – which is disappointing. Whilst we all know the reason why this fictional company is staffed by a bevy of young, beautiful women, the reality is that women are underrepresented in the industry. Rather than empowering women with a tale of successful role models, it could be argued that *New Game!* actually brushes a rather unsavoury fact under the carpet.

ACCURACY COUNTS

Another entertainment industry work-place anime, *Shirobako* focuses on an animation studio as they try to produce an ambitious TV project. It follows the careers of five women who are chasing their childhood dreams to create anime, so no hurdle is too high for them to jump over. It's a fun and engrossing show, especially as it's an anime about making anime, but yet again, there are a few parts of the reality that are absent from the story.

What *Shirobako* does well, however, is finding a balance in between *Girlish Number*'s more harsh reality, and *New Game!*'s more fluffy nature. Whilst it's rather accurate in its depiction of creating anime, the show doesn't worry itself >>>





1. Highs and lows for mangaka in *Bakuman*. 2. *Perfect Blue*: prepare for horror! 3. The face of *Girlish Number*'s disgruntled voice-actress.

>>> over being reference material for it. For example, there's a comedic part where Director Seiichi Kinoshita storms an office building in an outlandish action-inspired scene: it's very much not what you would expect from any professional – especially in Japan, where respect is so highly valued.

So, where does *Shirobako* gloss over some of the realities? The anime industry has a widespread problem with how much pressure employees are put under, week after week, with little break in between a show starting and finishing. Sadly, some employees have even taken their own lives due to stress, and some companies have had to force workers to go home in order to ensure they get enough rest. In an industry full of creative, driven people, in a country where a strong work ethic is a highly prized character trait, it's no wonder that so many people put their mental health at a low priority. This severe working environment and the truly poor pay are harsh realities you're unlikely to see portrayed often in anime.

Shirobako's issues are similarly reflected in *Bakuman*, but the latter focuses on creating manga. Brought to life by

Death Note's creative team, Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata, *Bakuman* fully acknowledges the real world by using authors and editors of *Weekly Shonen Jump* in its story, drawing on the real life experiences of the creators. Members of the story's manga team are hospitalised due to overwork, and they suffer many rejections and cancellations on their journey to get one of their mangas popular enough to be adapted into an anime.

The manga team in *Bakuman* creates a work that does indeed become popular enough to be considered for an anime adaptation, but its themes make it completely unsuitable due to the possibility of it being a bad influence on young children. This little plot point is a fascinating insight into the workings of the industry – and the differing demands of the anime and manga markets.

VIOLENT DELIGHTS

Perfect Blue is the best movie to turn to if you're looking for a darker look at the entertainment industry – specifically, the seemingly never-ending production line of idols. Mima

HAPPINESS IS HARD

American Artist Henry Thurlow moved to Tokyo to work on anime and he has openly spoken about how the Japanese animation industry is "illegally harsh".





"STORIES IN WHICH THE UNDERDOG RISES ABOVE THEIR MANY CHALLENGES IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS WILL ALWAYS BE CAPTIVATING, AND WHEN YOU DRESS THOSE STORIES UP WITH THE GLITZ AND GLAMOUR OF SHOWBIZ, THEY BECOME THAT MORE COMPELLING."

Kirigoe, a retired singing idol turned wannabe actress, is being stalked by an obsessed fan who doesn't agree with her change in career. But even she finds herself disillusioned by the path her new venture takes her down, and slowly begins to lose track of reality. This truly exceptional horror movie is a classic for a reason, and is sure to linger with you for days.

It's not just the stalking and the scenes of violence that have led to *Perfect Blue*'s iconic status. The transformation from actor to character can leave many a thespian finding it difficult to separate themselves from their role. In the movie, Mima lands a large role on TV series *Double Bind* and is then cast as a rape victim. Her friend, Rumi, warns her that this could ruin her reputation, given her squeaky clean record as an idol. Nevertheless, Mima accepts the role and shoots the scene, but is emotionally overwhelmed and unprepared for her visceral reaction to it. Her ability to distinguish what is real and what isn't begins to falter, and things only get worse from here.

Whilst Mima's reaction is a drastic one, it demonstrates the pressures that can be placed on performers, when turning down a role could be the end of your career, and when emotional vulnerability is an expected side effect of doing a good job. *Perfect Blue* is an important watch and it shows in

graphic detail the horrors and danger of stalkers, uncaring management and difficulty in making the right decision for yourself, and it's sadly an experience that some will be able to deeply relate to – especially in the age of the internet.

When the film was in development, Icelandic singer Björk was being stalked by an obsessive fan, who, just like the fictional Me-Mania, couldn't separate his fantasies from reality. Elements of *Perfect Blue*'s story have been repeated again and again in real life, when the mental health of performers can often take a back seat to creative demands driven by insatiable audiences and producers.

Sadly, in the real world, we had a recent example of the enormity of the stresses and strains of stardom when K-Pop star Kim Jong-hyun of SHINee took his own life last December when he was only 27 years old.

His death was linked to his struggles with depression and sparked discussion regarding mental health and the competitive nature of the entertainment industry in South Korea. These discussions will hopefully lead the way into encouraging those who need support to seek it out, lifting the taboo against discussing mental health and fostering honest discussion and understanding.

>>>

THERE'S A NAME FOR THAT

In South Korea, an obsessive fan is known as a *sasaeng fan*. These fans violate their idol's privacy by stalking, grabbing the person and their possessions, and loitering around a celebrity's home.



"THE GAMING INDUSTRY IS NOTORIOUS FOR THE PRESSURES PUT UPON THE EMPLOYEES. 80-HOUR WORK WEEKS AND HECTIC CRUNCH PERIODS MIGHT SOUND LIKE A NIGHTMARE, BUT THEY'RE A REALITY FOR MANY"

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

President of Fukushima Gainax, Yoshinori Asao, has said there are days when he's unable to sleep, go home or wash as part of the anime industry.

>>> IDOL MANIA

Perfect Blue is, thankfully, an outlier when it comes to depicting idols – the terrifying nightmarish vision of a blood-soaked starlet giggling madly as her grip on sanity is slowly loosened is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term 'idol anime'. No, much more likely are the cutesy antics of shows like *K-On!* or *Love Live!*, with their happy-go lucky characters, bright colours, adorable outfits, and plenty of low-stakes peril.

Love Live!'s look at the idol industry is not only much easier viewing than watching a poor young woman being driven mad by her ambition, but it's also a much more all-

round hopeful experience, following a group of girls who try to become idols in order to stop their school from closing. Its focus on music and chasing dreams is inspiring, which is no wonder, as the franchise was co-created as a multimedia project by *Dengeki G's Magazine*, music label Lantis, and animation studio Sunrise. Since the manga's launch, the story has sprawled its way into music CDs, AMVs, video games, an anime series, an anime movie, and a further sequel anime series.

Another franchise that follows wannabe idols through their various struggles on their way to stardom is *THE iDOLM@STER*, originally as series of games from Bandai

READ THE SOURCE MATERIAL

The *Perfect Blue* movie has been around for 20 years, and the novels it's based on finally made their way to the UK in May 2018.





Namco. These titles explore the stresses and strains of prospective stars as they work their way to the top, teasing through complex relationships and rivalries, and keeping track of the toll it's taking using a tension meter. [They should do one about magazine editors - Ed.]

The intrinsic drama of an idol's struggle for fame has obvious appeal – you could almost liken it to a sports anime where a team or athlete sets themselves a goal and then works tirelessly to achieve it. *THE iDOLM@STER* has captured this fascination to such great effect that the franchise now includes anime, audio dramas, a K-drama, radio shows and more – earning the project well over 10 billion yen.

The idol making machine is also explored in *Wake Up, Girls!*, a harsher look at the interpersonal relationships of members of idol groups, and the complex politics that go on behind the scenes to leave members ostracised or even fired, and how pursuing a career in an entertainment industry can have a negative effect on family life. Again, in *Wake Up, Girls!* money making is a priority for the company managing the fresh idol group, the idea for which was borne

out of desperation rather than passion. Each member of the idol troupe is a newcomer who's thrust into a new world where they're not properly supported by management and so must rely on each other to make it through the trials and tribulations. Envy, misunderstandings and an unwillingness to change causes problems, but *Wake Up, Girls!* focuses on the journeys of its characters as they struggle to improve both as idols, and as people.

From pure escapist fantasy, to nightmarish horror stories, anime about the entertainment industry is as varied as anime about any other topic. Stories in which the underdog rises above their many challenges in order to achieve their goals will always be captivating, and when you dress those stories up with the glitz and glamour of showbiz, they become that more compelling.

But scratch just beneath the surface, and there's definitely a murky underworld to explore. Perhaps by shining a light on some of the problems inherent in the entertainment world, fiction can lead the way to solving them...

Pick up *Girlish Number* from 28 May from MVM. ●

4. Voice-acting: where looking cute is surprisingly important. **5.** CHAM! The calm before the storm in *Perfect Blue*. **6.** *Girlish Number*: the struggle is real for Chitose. **7.** Surely a familiar sight for anyone reading this mag! **8.** *THE iDOLM@STER* franchise is immense and adorable. **9.** For some, getting to that stage is the only thing that matters...



IS THIS REALITY?

Perfect Blue was planned to be live-action, but the budget was heavily cut when the Kobe earthquake of 1995 damaged the studio.



MCM COMIC CON

SHOW RETURNS 25-27 MAY

THE POP CULTURE extravaganza returns to London this month, with plenty of big name movies and TV shows, including *Deadpool 2*, *The Walking Dead* and *Orange is the New Black*. “We’re really excited to open the doors of the first MCM London Comic Con of 2018 – not only will we play host to a range of exclusive activations from major entertainment brands, but we’ll be delivering incredible panels for the fans to enjoy across the weekend,” says Josh Denham, MCM London Event Manager.

We spoke to some of our favourite distributors to discover what treats they had in store for con-goers during the event! Tony Allen told us: “MVM Entertainment has been busy acquiring new anime licenses which will be announced over the MCM Comic Con weekend. Exciting new titles and an update on our plans including some very nice collector’s editions. As usual the MVM stand will have early availability on not yet released titles and our “deal of the day” offers. Drop by to pick up our full colour catalogue.”

Also, Andy Hanley of Anime Limited told us to expect plenty of announcements and reveals, and added “The show’s Anime Guest of Honour in conjunction with MCM and ourselves will be Shouji Gatou, the author of *Full Metal Panic!* Mr. Gatou will be at the show for signing sessions and panels across the weekend, where he’ll also be present for screenings of the new *Full Metal Panic* anime series, *Invisible Victory!*” You can also expect early stock of a range of their titles including *Sword Art Online: Ordinal Scale*, and *Fairy Tail: Dragon Cry*, plus panels and even some cinema showings of new films, and maybe even a modern classic!

Manga Entertainment will also be at the event, hosting an online charity fundraiser, as well as offering their wares with some great bargains to be snapped up!

Head to www.mcmcomiccon.com for more information, including special guest announcements, and to buy tickets. Whilst NEO will not be in attendance, look out on our social media for some great subscription deals – just in time for summer!



Expo photos by Anthony Byrne



HYPER JAPAN

13-15 July

If a more Japan-focussed event is what you’re after, Hyper Japan is sure to tickle your fancy – a three day celebration of Japanese pop culture held at Olympia London. From tasty treats to cosplay and fashion, there’s sure to be something for everyone!

Cosplayers can expect plenty of attention from the Hyper Japan press photographers, so make sure to dress up in your finest gear – and don’t forget to sew in some pockets for your cash... there will be plenty of stalls ready to make you part with it! One of our favourite parts of the festival is the food court, with so many mouth-watering dishes on offer you’ll want to make sure you have your breakfast, lunch and dinner at the show! But what better to wash that all down with than a nice cup of sake – or two? The Sake Experience promises a chance for you to taste premium products from some of the most exciting breweries in Japan, whilst chatting with the producers as you do so. Tickets are available as an additional purchase to your Hyper Japan entry tickets, and cost £20, bookable in advance. As if that wasn’t enough, the show also features HYPER Kawaii, a dedicated fan space where you can celebrate your favourite style with like-minded fashionistas. And, just as you would expect from a Japanese culture event, there are also plenty of merchandise stalls where you can pick up anime, manga, movies, games, clothing, trinkets, sweets, and more!

If you can’t make it down to the summer celebration – or you’d just like another trip – there’s also Hyper Japan Christmas, which is held between 24-26 November at Tobacco Dock in London. More details about both events can be found at www.hyperjapan.co.uk. Tickets for the July event range from £50 for a three day pass, to as low as £17 for the Friday session. Concessions are available, with some great offers for kids, too.

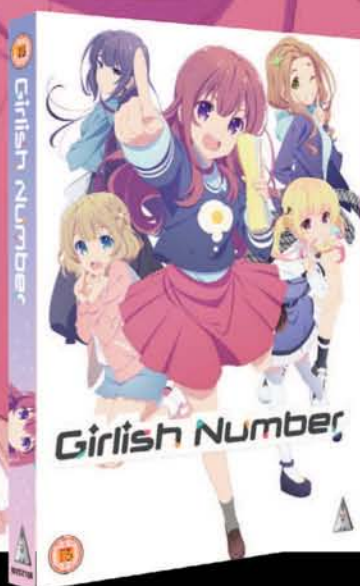




Girlish Number Collection

Forget bit parts ... this girl's going for the big break!

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//COMING UP NOBUNAGA'S AMBITION: TAISHI

OUT: 8TH JUNE // DISTRIBUTOR: KOEI TECMO

The long-running Japanese strategy series celebrates its 35th anniversary this summer with the western release of *Nobunaga's Ambition: Taishi* on the PlayStation 4 and PC. Set during the tumultuous Sengoku Era when rival warlords competed for power, players conduct Military Campaigns to achieve dominance, as well as building up their vital Production Facilities and Trade Routes. The new Resolve System gives each commanding officer their own personal goals, which will influence their actions and behaviour during each campaign of conquest.



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NEO'S TOPTEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently
blasting on the office stereo

WORDS BY TOM SMITH

1 LOVEBITES – BREAK THE WALL 8 JUNE

It's a busy year for Tokyo's latest ladies of metal. Their blinding debut album *Awakening From Abyss* has gone down a storm inside and outside of Japan, even leading to the power metal band being nominated Best New Band by *Metal Hammer* for their Golden Gods Awards. Label JPU Records are so happy about the news that they're jetting two members of the band to London on 11 June to attend the awards ceremony at Indigo at the London O2!

But that's not all! The band will release their new EP *Battle Against Damnation* the Friday before the appearance. The release will feature four brand new tracks that won't be appearing on any future albums and has opening track *The Crusade* available to download right now digitally. We've managed to have a sneaky listen to the EP ahead of release, and for us it's second track *Break The Wall* that really causes outbreaks of sporadic headbanging in the office. The physical version of the EP includes lyrics and liner notes from the band.

LOVEBITES will also be doing a mini metal festival tour this August, playing Germany's biggest metal fest Wacken Open Air on Saturday 4 August followed by the UK's biggest metal gathering Bloodstock Open Air. The latter takes place at Walton Upon Trent in Derbyshire and sees LOVEBITES play ahead of their heroes Judas Priest and Emperor on Friday 10 August.

NEW EP! FESTIVAL SHOWS ANNOUNCED!



Photo: Yoshika Horita

NEW SINGLE! UK SHOWS!



2 MAISON BOOK GIRL – KARMA 25 MAY

Brand new label Read The Air Records make their mark on the scene by unleashing the latest single from J-pop group Maison Book Girl from 25 May on digital formats and as a limited edition, blue, seven-inch vinyl. To celebrate, the label are bringing the group over to the UK for a string of shows this May – so if you're a subscriber of NEO you may still have some time to grab tickets!

Maison Book Girl will be heading to Birmingham's Hare and Hounds on the 16th, play Brighton's Great Escape festival on the 18th and conclude at London's Boston Music Rooms on the 19th.

Taking influence from everything from Scandinavian dream-pop to Japanese classical music, modern ambient minimalist, chiptune and video game soundtracks Maison Book Girl are part of the so-called "new-age" wave of J-pop. The single *KARMA* is available now on YouTube, so give it a listen!

UK DATES!



3 CRYSTAL LAKE – APOLLO 4, 5 JULY

Tokyo metalcore heroes Crystal Lake are back in the UK this summer as part of their massive 18-date European tour. We attended their debut UK show last year and it was quite possibly the most chaotic show we've been to in a long time – the crowd were bouncing from start to finish and drummer Gaku split his drum skins by the second song!

This time round the band will perform a headline set at the Boston Music Room in London on 4 July. Tickets are on sale now from the ticket app DICE and are priced at a very reasonable £11. Crystal Lake will then head over to Newark for UK Tech-Fest 2018 on 5 July with the likes of Protest the Hero, Sigh and another great Japanese tech-metal act called Cyclamen. If you're heading over to Paris for Japan Expo you can also catch Crystal Lake there on 6 July.

NEW ALBUM!



4 B.A.P. – HANDS UP 27 MAY

Hands up if K-pop is your thing! Ganshin Records may just have the launch for you. The German label is due to release Korea's B.A.P.'s third Japanese album *MASSIVE* on CD in the UK from 27 May – bit of a confusing sentence, what with four different countries being mentioned! The boyband's release schedule differs at home and in Japan, and the release coming to the UK will be licensed from Japanese label King Records.

Hands Up is the group's ninth single in Japan and has been stuck in our heads ever since it reached number four in Japan's official charts at the start of the year. Make sure you check it out!

5 MONO – ROCKSTAR 22 JUNE

Instrumental post-rock band MONO bring shoegaze guitar noise and orchestral arrangements to Robert Smith's *Meltdown*, a series of gigs taking place at London's Southbank Centre curated by the frontman of The Cure.

Described by *NME* as 'music for the Gods', after releasing ten albums, including a live album with the Wordless Music Orchestra in New York, the band have gone on to receive the Marshall Hawkins Award for Best Original Score for their collaborative short film *Where We Begin*.

MONO play Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall on 22 June. Tickets are on sale now priced between £20-£25 directly from southbankcentre.co.uk.

NEW SINGLE!



6 LADYBABY – BILI BILI MONEY 30 MAY

LADYBABY have had a couple of line-up changes since their inception, including the departure of hairy wrestler-in-a-tutu LADYBEARD in 2016. Well, now he's back! Though just as a guest vocalist on the group's new song *Bili Bili Money* off of LADYBABY's first single as a four-member unit, due for release 30 May. Meanwhile, JPU Records will release The Idol Formerly Known As LADYBABY's best of album *Beside U* on CD and digital formats from 25 May in the UK. LADYBEARD's new group Deadlift Lolita, are also rumoured to be heading to the UK this summer.

7 HOTEL – KILL TO LOVE YOU 20 OCTOBER

HOTEL's London show will be at the Shepherd's Bush Empire on 20 October. "It's such a thrill to be able to play at my favourite venue," states the *Kill Bill* guitarist. "I promise I will play my guitar with a delicate, yet cutting edge and powerful sound, with the on stage chemistry completed by performing with my amazing musicians. We have arranged a fully seated venue this time, so you can enjoy my music in a more relaxed environment." Tickets are on sale now from Ticket Master.

NEW ALBUM! FESTIVAL DATES!



8 ROA – USHISM 25 MAY

Japan's shamisen punk-rockers ROA are ready to take the UK by storm with the release of their exclusive overseas album from JPU Records on 25 May, and have just booked themselves some festival dates over here too! You'll be able to catch them at Hyper Japan this July with possible further UK dates to be announced nearer the time. We love the sound that the traditional shamisen brings to their style, and we hear that their latest band member is none other than the writer of BABYMETAL's mega-hit *Megitsune!*

9 NECRONOMIDOL – ABHOTH 4-6 JUNE

What happens when you cross J-pop idols with Cthulu mythos and Japanese horror vibes? Necronomidol, that's what! The ultra-dark unit are heading back to England this June for three gigs with idol buddies Screaming Sixties and Double And. Catch them in Manchester's Night and Day Cafe, Birmingham's Hare and Hounds and London's Underworlds between 4-6 June with VIP options to meet the group available too.

ENGLAND DATES!



ENGLAND DATES!



10 SCREAMING SIXTIES – ONLY PLACE WE CAN CRY 4-6 JUNE

Joining Necronomidol on their England tour is underground idols Screaming Sixties (also known as Zekkyousuru 60do in Japanese), leaving behind their band members to come to the UK as a two-person unit.

Their single *ONLY PLACE WE CAN CRY* is a cracking slice of pop-rock and we can't wait to see them on this rare overseas performance; it's going to be a blast!

REMEMBERING PAKU-SAN

JONATHAN CLEMENTS ON THE OBITUARY INDUSTRY

Look for the term Paku-san (“Mr Munchy”) – an affectionate nickname born of the late Isao Takahata’s habit of scoffing his toast on his early-morning studio rounds. It’s a common occurrence in Japanese-language reminiscences and studio memoirs. And reference to it often separated the wheat from the chaff in last month’s rondo of Takahata obituaries.

You’re in safe hands with NEO magazine, for which Andrew Osmond has fashioned a loving tribute this issue, but the coverage of Takahata in other publications has been of variable quality. It’s an interesting sampler not only of how far we’ve come (a lovely *Guardian* piece by Jasper Sharp, I see!), but of how far we haven’t – far too many clueless paste jobs from Wikipedia.

Sadly, they *don’t* know who they are. Few obituarists, for example, noted that Takahata worked as a producer on both *Nausicaä* and *Castle in the Sky*, many accounts of his box-office “failure” *Little Norse Prince*, made under hostile studio conditions and effectively buried by its own distributors, were hopelessly garbled, seemingly by writers who thought it would be easy to cram such a full life of achievements into a simple list of films he directed.

One news-hound from a well-known British broadcaster inadvisably spammed anyone on Twitter who had mentioned Takahata, asking them if they wanted to come in for an interview. Unfortunately for him, this was all publicly visible, so would-be pundits could see him sucking up to Some Guy With a Blog with precisely the same enthusiasm as he was to Respected Filmmaker. In

“ONE NEWS-HOUND FROM A WELL-KNOWN BRITISH BROADCASTER INADVISABLY SPAMMED ANYONE ON TWITTER WHO HAD MENTIONED TAKAHATA, ASKING THEM IF THEY WANTED TO COME IN FOR AN INTERVIEW.”

a marvellous gaffe, he also tried to get an interview with Roger Ebert, who has been dead for five years.

In obituary terms, Takahata might look like an easy grade. There is, after all, a lot of secondary material about him. It’s not like Akira Kurosawa, who died without half of the anime industry even knowing how to pronounce his name. But Takahata is still oddly under-represented in English-language interviews and books.

At least one attempt to write a book-length study of Takahata’s work was thwarted in the early noughties by studio recalcitrance – it is not necessarily the fault of



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1. *The Little Norse Prince* marked the beginning of the creative partnership between Miyazaki and Takahata. 2. *Grave of the Fireflies* is perhaps Takahata’s most critically acclaimed work. 3. Isao Takahata worked as the producer on the Miyazaki-directed *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*.

English-language authors that some figures are under-represented. Whatever the reason, there’s no BFI classic on *Grave of the Fireflies* or *Princess Kaguya*. There’s no translation (yet) of his collected essays, *Things I Thought While Making Films*. In criticism, as in life, Miyazaki got the attention first, and his friend and mentor was all too often tabled for later. ●

NEXT MONTH!

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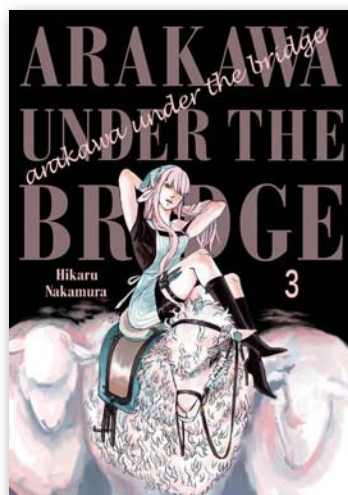


UK release schedule



ANIME

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
21/05	Naruto Shippuden 32 [DVD]	Manga
21/05	Power Rangers Dino Super Charge 2 [DVD]	Manga
21/05	Pokémon Movie 10-13 [DVD]	Manga
28/05	Fairy Tail: Dragon Cry (Combi Collector's, DVD, Blu-ray)	Anime Limited
28/05	Sword Art Online II: Part 1 [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
28/05	Sword Art Online the Movie: Ordinal Scale (Combi Collector's, DVD, Blu-ray)	Anime Limited
28/05	Mobile Suit Gundam: The Origin I-IV (Blu-ray Limited Edition)	Anime Limited
28/05	Lupin the 3rd: Part 4 [Blu-ray Collector's]	Anime Limited
28/05	Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust [Blu-ray Collector's]	Anime Limited
28/05	Wolf's Rain (Ultimate Edition Blu-ray)	Anime Limited
28/05	BLAME! (DVD, Blu-ray)	Manga
28/05	Blue Exorcist Kyoto Saga 2 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
28/05	Girlish Number Collection [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
04/06	Grimgar: Ashes and Illusions [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
04/06	Dragon Ball Super Part 3 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
04/06	Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex (Deluxe Blu-ray)	Manga
04/06	Flip Flappers Collector's Edition [Blu-ray]	MVM
11/06	Yusibu Collection [Blu-ray, DVD Combi]	MVM
11/06	My Hero Academia 2:2 [Blu-ray, DVD]	Funimation/Sony
18/06	Osamu Tezuka's 1001 Nights / Cleopatra	Third Window
18/06	Heaven's Lost Property Season 1 Collection [Blu-ray, DVD Combi]	MVM
18/06	Love Live! Sunshine!! Season 1 [Blu-ray Collector's, DVD]	Anime Limited
18/06	Persona 3: Movie 4 [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
17/05	Cells at Work! 6	Kodansha
17/05	Kiss Me at the Stroke of Midnight 5	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
17/05	Wake Up, Sleeping Beauty 4	Kodansha
17/05	Attack on Titan Choose Your Path Adventure 2	Kodansha
17/05	Mobile Suit Gundam WING 6: The Glory of Losers	Kodansha
17/05	Black Clover 11	Shonen Jump
17/05	Bleach 3-in-1 Edition 23	Shonen Jump
17/05	Dr. Slump (volumes 1-18 as individual releases)	Shonen Jump
17/05	Fullmetal Alchemist: Fullmetal Edition 1	VIZ Media
17/05	Haikyu!! 23	Shonen Jump
17/05	Hoshin Engi (volumes 19-23 as individual releases)	Shonen Jump
17/05	Hikaru No Go (volumes 1-23 as individual releases)	Shonen Jump
17/05	Homestuck 1	VIZ Media
17/05	Hoshin Engi (volumes 1-14 as individual releases)	Shonen Jump
17/05	Jojo's Bizarre Adventure 3 Stardust Crusades 7	Shonen Jump
17/05	Kaguya-sama: Love is War 2	Shonen Jump
17/05	Naruto: Chibi Sasuke's Sharingan Legend 3	Shonen Jump
17/05	One Piece 86	Shonen Jump
17/05	Real (volumes 1-14 as individual releases)	VIZ Media
17/05	Sand Land	Shonen Jump
17/05	Short-Tempered Melancholic and Other Stories	Shojo Beat
17/05	Slam Dunk (volumes 1-31 as individual releases)	Shonen Jump
17/05	Toriko 42	Shonen Jump
17/05	Twin Star Exorcists 12	Shonen Jump
31/05	RWB Official Manga Anthology Vol 1	VIZ Media
24/05	Arakawa Under the Bridge 3	Vertical
24/05	Golosseum 1	Kodansha
31/05	Sailor Moon Eternal Edition 2	Kodansha
31/05	Waiting for Spring 6	Kodansha
07/06	Usagi Yojimbo: The Special Edition	Fantagraphics
07/06	Vinland Saga 10	Kodansha
07/06	Descending Stories: Showa Genroku Rakugo	Kodansha



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
28/05	Gifted	88 Films
28/05	Tokyo Ghoul	Anime Ltd
04/06	Birth Of The Dragon	Altitude Film Entertainment
11/06	Akio Jissoji: The Buddhist Trilogy	Arrow Academy
11/06	Black Magic 2	88 Films
11/06	Mishima: A Life In Four Chapters	Criterion
18/06	Iron Monkey	Eureka
25/06	The Spiritual Boxer	88 Films
02/07	Ninja: Legend Of The Brave	101 Films
16/07	Hansel & Gretel	88 Films
16/07	Tale Of Cinema/Woman Is The Future Of Man	Arrow Academy
20/07	The Receptionist	Munro Film Services Ltd
23/07	The Third Murder	Arrow Academy
23/07	The Human Condition Trilogy	Arrow Academy
23/07	Suffering Of Ninko	Third Window Films
27/07	Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings	Cine Asia
24/09	Cold War 2: Extreme Measures	Cine Asia



COMING JUNE 22!

POUBE

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MAIN LINEUP



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WORDS BY DAVID WEST

Woman Is The Future Of Man



ARROW TARGETS HONG AND KORE'EDA

Two from Korea's vaults and a new Japanese thriller

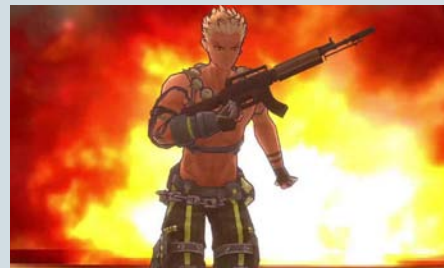
THE FILMS OF Korean director Hong Sang-soo may be staples of the international festival circuit, but they never seem to make it onto DVD in the UK – the 2013 release of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* stands as the rare exception. Now Arrow Academy is set to release a double bill of two of Hong's films from 2004 and 2005.

Woman Is The Future Of Man sees two drinking buddies, Lee Mun-ho (Yoo Ji-tae) and Kim Hyeon-gon (Kim Tae-woo), sharing their memories of a mutual lover, Park Seon-hwa (Sung Hyun-ah), who they decide to visit. An even worse idea than drunk-dialling your ex. *Tale Of Cinema* is a film of two halves, the first concerning Sang-weon (Lee Gi-woo) and Yeong-shil (Eom Ji-weon) who, following a failed attempt at sex, decide to form a suicide pact. Then there's Tong-su (Kim Sang-gyeong) who sees a film starring an actress, Yeong-shil (Eom Ji-weon again), that echoes his own life. Both movies will be released together on Blu-ray on 16 July.

Arrow Academy continues to expand their collection of the films of Hirokazu Kore'eda with the release of *The Third Murder*, which sees the director take a break from his trademark studies of dysfunctional families for a courtroom thriller. Shigemori (Masaharu Fukuyama) is the attorney assigned to defend Misumi (Kôji Yakusho), a convicted killer on trial for another murder, but despite his client admitting his guilt, Shigemori starts to suspect Misumi is hiding the truth. *The Third Murder* comes to DVD and Blu-ray on 23 July.



The Third Murder



METAL MAX XENO

Armour Up!

Last year the *Metal Max* videogame celebrated its 25th anniversary with the Japanese release of *Metal Max Xeno* on the PS Vita, developed by Kadokawa Games. Now the title is heading west onto the PS4. The action takes place in a future where humanity has been almost wiped out by the sentient computer known as NOA. Players must travel the desolate wastes looking for allies to join them in the fight against NOA's forces, which actively hunt you down in the ravaged remains of the great metropolis Tokio. Characters can explore on foot as well as salvaging and customising tanks to use in battle, giving the gameplay a blend of RPG elements and heavy artillery action. *Metal Max Xeno* comes out this autumn from NIS America and can be pre-ordered in a Limited Edition containing an artbook, soundtrack album, and collector's box.

PRINCE LAHARL RETURNS

Disgaea Gets An Upgrade

When his father, the King of the Netherworld, unexpectedly kicks the bucket, Prince Laharl sets out to claim the throne – but he's not the only one out to rule. Accompanied by his vassal Etna and the trainee angel Flonne, Laharl's outrageous adventure began in *Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness*, first released 15 years ago, spawning a hit videogame franchise and an anime adaptation. Now the classic RPG title is being remastered with contemporary HD graphics, heading for the Nintendo Switch and PlayStation 4 this autumn from NIS America as *Disgaea 1 Complete*. The new version includes the classic story from *Hour Of Darkness*, plus *Etna Mode* which features new characters not in the original version.



This screenshot is from a Japanese development version of the game.



TOUR COMPLETE!

OUR RESIDENT IDOL SHARES HER JOY AT COMPLETING
HER TOUR OF JAPAN WITH MOSO CALIBRATION

HELLO! MAHIRU KURUMIZAWA here again from the Japanese idol group Moso Calibration! Today marks a very special time in my life. Today is the day Moso Calibration completed a 47-prefecture tour of Japan, which means we visited every part of Japan! Each prefecture had its own characteristics and warm heart.

We started this tour in May last year and travelled nearly all places by car! One time we drove to the north of Japan from the south, so we became accustomed to taking ten-hour journeys together. It was a good opportunity to bond with the other members of the group.

The tour finale took place in Shibuya, Tokyo where we performed 18 songs, three of which were new songs. One of these songs was a cover of fripSide's *Only My Railgun*. We have a lot of opportunities to perform outside of Japan, so we imagined that it's important to perform a famous anime song, so we decided to pick something from the show *A Certain Scientific Railgun*. We hope anime fans will recognise it and sing along at our concerts! This song is very popular in Japan so we were very excited to play it.

Some of the tracks we sung are produced by popular VOCALOID producers. My personal favourite Moso Calibration song is produced by DECO*27 and called in English *I Don't Like it Anymore, Seriously* – it's the best song I've ever sung! Another is by Yonezu Kenshi, who goes by the VOCALOID name of Hachi. We did a cover of his song *Peace Sign, My Hero Academia's* opening theme. I was sooooo excited to sing these! And the power from the audience's voice was overwhelming! So much so that the people on the first floor couldn't hear our voices over them! We could feel that a lot of fans waited for us to come back to Tokyo to perform, we could feel their love for Moso Calibration.

We experienced hard work and many enjoyable incidents during our tour. I think it gives us growth as a group. I want to show you guys how much we've grown since we were last in London! Hopefully we can come back soon!

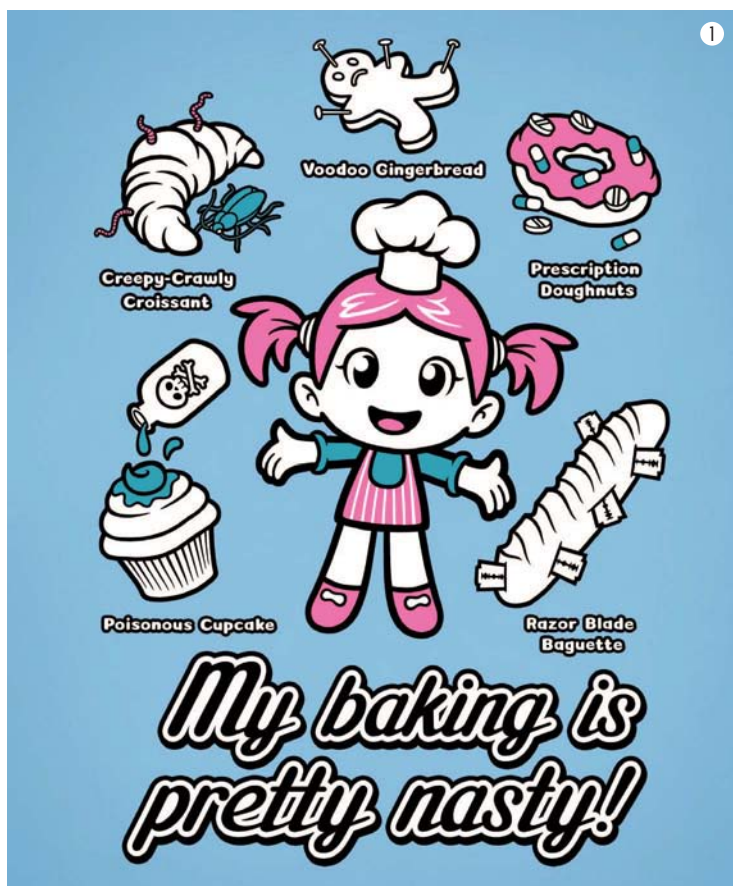
Keep in touch with me on Instagram (@mahiru104) and Twitter (@lunch_mahiru) – I use English on my Instagram!

See you next time! ●



WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1. NASTY BAKING TEE

Can't Cook, Won't Cook, I Put Razor Blades In Baguettes... Grab your Nasty Baking tee from www.genkgear.com now for £15.99 in three colours and various sizes!

2. CUTE KINGDOM HEARTS RUBBER CLIPS

From Ensky comes these double sided clips that make it look as though these *Kingdom Hearts* characters are perched adorably on whatever you've clipped them to! Get yours for £7 each from www.rawckz.com (randomly packaged),

3. GUTS: BLACK SWORDSMAN STATUE

This premium resin piece is absolutely enormous: 69 by 61 by 51 cm! The statue has a hand-numbered base and comes in a printed collector's box. Pre-purchase now at www.animegami.co.uk ahead of the March 2019 release and get a 5% discount.

4. HATSUNE MIKU 10TH ANNIVERSARY FIGURE

Available as a Japan Exclusive for £29 from www.TokyoToys.com is this amazing 10th anniversary figure! Psychedelic!

5. DARK SOULS STATUE

With a June release date scheduled, you can pre-purchase this PVC statue of Artorias the Abysswalker for an exclusive discount of 5% from www.animegami.co.uk!

6. MY HERO ACADEMIA KEYCHAINS

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COSPLAY CORNER

NEO READERS STRUT THEIR STUFF!

[BELOW] Yasmine Williams (nepxchun) as Kotori, (lil devil set) from *Love Live!*. Photo by Chibishots.

[RIGHT] Spookyelectric cosplay as Ryuko from *Kill La Kill*. Photo by Chibishots.

[BOTTOM] *Borderlands* cosplay by @lavish_bookman and @invisibletrickster (both on Instagram). Photo by Nick Acott photography.





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NINTENDO
SWITCH



ANIME EXPOSÉ

KAKURIYO NO YADOMESHI

Another spooking away



IT'S THE SPRING season on Japanese TV, but you'd think Halloween had come early. Both of the new series we're looking at feature characters who can see into the world of spooks, monsters and shapechangers, and not through the bottom of a sake bottle. Aoi, the heroine of *Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi*, encountered one such spook when she was a child, and thought it would eat her. Instead the scary-looking being saved her life. Aoi's always been able to see the supernatural, and she doesn't cower from it like Haley Joel Osment. Instead she caters to the weird creatures from the other side, giving them tasty snacks so they won't prey on humans.

Time passes. Aoi turns 19, and suffers a major bereavement when her grandfather – who adopted Aoi when her mother spurned her – suddenly dies. Still, Aoi stays attentive to her duties. In front of a shrine, she gives a neatly-wrapped bento to a youth in an ogre mask. His face beneath is human and handsome, but he's still an ogre – and mysteriously, he knows Aoi's name. Returning later, Aoi finds a wrapped package left by the ogre youth in return – a package that unwraps itself and engulfs Aoi in liquid night. Too late, the girl recalls her granddad's warning, that humans who interact with spirits will be targeted by them....

Aoi wakes in a plush room, decorated in traditional Japanese style, and is greeted by the ogre-youth and his staff. He introduces himself as the Master of this establishment, and tells Aoi she'll be his bride (though

some of the Master's staff seem strongly displeased by this announcement). Unsurprisingly, Aoi's reaction is to bolt for the door, from where she looks out at a realm of old buildings, glowing lanterns, and flying galleons. She's in another world, yet she suddenly recognises the building she's standing in. She saw it in an old photo belonging to her granddad! In other words, she's not the first person in her family to travel beyond the human world...

What comes next is still more of a shocker. The Master claims that Shiro, Aoi's grandfather, regularly crossed between the human and "hidden" realms, and ran up a huge debt in Tenjin-ya, the Master's lavish establishment. In order to repay the debt, Shiro offered the ogre some precious collateral... Shiro's granddaughter's hand in marriage! When Aoi asks, reasonably enough, why a high-ranking ogre would want to marry a human he's never met, the Master tells Aoi she has a "delicious" spiritual power. Very creepily, he suggests that to wed Aoi without eating her would be an aphrodisiac torture for him. This is fairy-tale romance laced with Freudian perversity.

SEEKING THE STORY

Aoi's not impressed by the offer, though. She demands to know how much Shiro owed – a lot – and declares she'll pay the debt back through working, rather than marry some ogre! At once, the Master turns cold. He warns Aoi



"IT'S THE SPRING SEASON ON JAPANESE TV, BUT YOU'D THINK HALLOWEEN HAD COME EARLY."



that he won't give her shelter or protection, before turning his back on her.

Aoi seeks a job at Tenjin-ya, but finds herself rejected at every turn, till she finds a set of strange glowing arrows. They lead her to a smaller restaurant on Tenjin-ya's grounds. Here a friendlier youth, Ginji, tells her the place is on the verge of closing, but if Aoi – who's a skilled cook, thanks to her granddad – wants to make a go of putting the restaurant back in business...

Last month we commented on the difficulty of discussing a new show that's still revealing its shape (or even its lack of shape). In its early episodes, *Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi* seems to evoke at least four obvious fantasy anime, and it's not clear which strand will dominate. The story's opening recalls *Spirited Away*, especially the palatial hotel-workplace. The way that Aoi is commanded to marry her magic host recalls *The Ancient Magus' Bride* (and the manner in which she's offered up as collateral for her patriarch's

debt evokes the original *Beauty and the Beast* tale). As for Aoi's plan to set up a restaurant, bringing human dishes to magic folk, just think back to *Restaurant to Another World*.

But interestingly, the show is also venturing on the same territory as the delightful *The Eccentric Family*. Both anime have a similar taste in folklore; their characters include cute shapechanging tanuki (cuddly dogs) and dignified tengu demons (beaky old men), each adding different spices to the story. Both series also focus on a recently-dead character – in this case, Aoi's grandfather Shiro. There are themes of loss and continuity. Aoi slowly learns that her granddad had a life she never dreamed of, and that his heritage affects her even now.

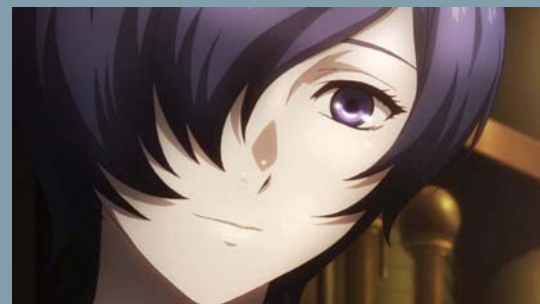
So far *Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi*'s visuals, by the venerable Gonzo studio, aren't anything special, and its talky scenes can be draggy. However, its story elements hold out a great deal of promise for future episodes. ●

ALSO STREAMING...



FULL METAL PANIC! INVISIBLE VICTORY

Spring 2018 is the season of the returning franchise. So here's the fourth season of *Full Metal Panic!*, 13 years after *The Second Raid* in 2005. Kaname and Sousuke both return in a series that's promoted as a direct continuation of the franchise (no alternate timeline kerfuffles), following the original light novels by Shoji Gatoh. This is the first *Full Metal Panic!* series to be made by the Xebec studio, who brought us such mecha anime as *Lagrange* and *Broken Blade*.



TOKYO GHOUL: RE

Reportedly this new incarnation of *Tokyo Ghoul* opens somewhat confusingly. The war between the CCG and the Ghouls is rumbling on, but now a raft of new characters is introduced, primarily the members of a CCG squad whose leader looks oddly familiar. This is based on Sui Ishida's sequel *Ghoul* manga, also called *Tokyo Ghoul: re*. It could have been made to appease all the Ishida fans who were outraged when the second (*Root A*) anime series started making things up willy-nilly.



STEINS;GATE 0

Time travel stories often involve alternate worlds where most of the details and people are familiar, but there's one crucial difference. *Stein's;Gate 0* imagines what if the original *Steins;Gate* had ended differently. In this altered version, the "mad scientist" Okabe is haunted by failures in his past which threaten doomsday in the future. But to stop things getting too heavy and complicated, nearly all his Akihabara gang of misfits and nitwits are still around, as loveable as ever.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

GEGEGE NO KITARO

The spooky anime legend you've (probably) never heard of



Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi on the previous two pages may invite comparisons to *Spirited Away*. But from a broader perspective, both those titles – plus a ton of other anime, from *Yokai Watch* to *Ushio & Tora* – owe a collective debt to a far older manga / anime franchise. We suspect that many NEO readers haven't heard of *Gegege no Kitaro* before. But it's a trusted property in Japan; there aren't many anime that could step into the timeslot of the just-ended-for-the-moment *Dragon Ball Super*. That timeslot is 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning (Fuji TV) and yes, *Kitaro* is a kid's show. But it features characters who are decades older than Son Goku *et al.*

Gegege no Kitaro is the ghosts'n'ghouls, *yokai* anime. Kitaro is an ageless, non-human boy who lives among those ghosts, ghouls and graveyards, as naturally and casually as a sci-fi heroine like Major Kusanagi inhabits cyberspace. The ghost world is Kitaro's world; he's the boy who Tim Burton only dreams of being. Naturally, Kitaro lives in the deep woods, with multi-coloured, many-shaped companions. None of them look remotely odd to Kitaro, be it a walking wall called Wally (repeat that ten times!), or Kitaro's own father Medama-oyaji, who takes the form of a tiny naked body with an eyeball for a head. We know he sounds horrible, but he's utterly lovely.

There are more troublesome neighbours, naturally, such as the cunning Rat Man, who could just about pass as the world's most rodent-like human (and that's counting Steve Buscemi in *Fargo*). In his first appearance, he's seen piddling on a sacred rock which unleashes a terrible demon. Soon Rat Man is the same demon's devoted servant, buying up an idol group in the human world

as part of a terrible plan for conquest. So that's a monster of the week, girl idols and rodent pee in one episode. We suspect *Dragon Ball* creator Akira Toriyama watched Kitaro as a nipper and took notes.

Being non-human, Kitaro is rather detached from human affairs – you get the feeling he views us as we'd view strange green men from Mars. But he can be persuaded to help mortals when spirit creatures threaten the human realm. In this new series, the main human character is Mana, a typically spunky anime schoolgirl. She's understandably alarmed when a *yokai* phenomenon starts turning people into trees in central Tokyo! Mana is voiced in Japanese by Yukiyo Fuji, who has a habit of running into venerable anime characters. In the 2015 series of *Lupin the Third* (the one set in Italy), Fuji voiced Rebecca Rossellini, who actually married the master thief.

THIS IS YOUR FATHER'S KITARO

Of course, the Mana character provides a way into the series for young viewers who haven't seen *Kitaro* before, though parents or older siblings could explain it to them. As we mentioned, *Kitaro* is an old character, effectively created in his modern form by artist Shigeru Mizuki. The first anime debuted in black and white in 1968, and there've been umpteen series made since then. Incidentally, Kitaro's first anime voice, back in the 1960s, was actress Masako Nozawa. She's now known to fandom as the voice of *Dragon Ball*'s Son Goku, and she also voices Kitaro's eyeball-dad in this new series. (Incidentally, she's 82.) The new Kitaro is voiced by Miyuki Sawashiro, who's Celty in *Durarara!!* and Fujiko in the *Lupin* franchise since 2011.



2



3

Going Mainstream

A few issues ago, discussing *Devilman*, we claimed that Kitaro became less scary when he was adapted to anime. But according to Jonathan Clements, the readers of *Weekly Shonen Jump* had already asked that Kitaro – the manga character – should be more an “agent of justice,” fighting evil spirits. It was this modified Kitaro which attracted the Toei anime studio. However, it was a Toei staffer who suggested the manga’s name, *Graveyard Kitaro*, be changed to the more playful *Gegege no Kitaro*.

Spook’s Origins

Kitaro was originally a Japanese folklore figure. From 1933, he was a character in *kamishibai* theatre, picture stories performed by travelling performers (which were important precursors to manga). Shigeru Mizuki first used the *yokai* boy in a manga in 1960; five years later, Mizuki’s Kitaro debuted in *Weekly Shonen Magazine*. By 1968, the lad was starring in his first TV anime and no less than eight different manga in various magazines, including one where Kitaro helps the Viet Cong fight America!

1. Mana, our human viewpoint in this series. 2. Kitaro and his neighbours in the yokai world. 3. Rat Man goes incognito in human society.

The really long-lived anime characters tend to be unchanged by the passing decades. You could see it as a point of honour that they don’t try to fit in with contemporary fashions. Certainly Kitaro, Rat Man and Medama-oyaji are very much as they’ve always been – though in the first episode, Medama-oyaji is pointedly fascinated by Mana’s new-fangled smartphone, a piece of tech that would have seemed like *Star Trek* futurism in 1968.

However, fans have noted that one Kitaro character is changing with the times – Kitaro’s acquaintance Neko-musume, who’s a yokai girl who can change into a cat monster. Originally, she looked like a preteen girl, but by the 2000s, she was becoming, well, *shapely*. In the new series, she’s gained the legs of a *Vogue* model and a *tsundere* attitude. Quite obviously, she’s been redesigned to keep older males watching. If you’re wondering what artist Shigeru Mizuki thinks of this, we’re afraid you’d have to ask a medium; he died in 2015.

But Kitaro lives on, joining an anime season that’s heaving with revivals of old titles and characters. There’s *Steins;Gate*, *Lupin the Third*, *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*, even a new *Cutie Honey*. It’s proof of the power of retro media – witness the recent *Ready Player One*. But there’s always the nagging worry; will any new anime character this year, or even this decade, have the 50-year staying power of the boyish Kitaro? ●

OPENING

The opening song is a new cover of the classic Kitaro theme song from the 1960s, with enticing lyrics such as “ghosts and ghouls don’t go to school...”



LIVE ACTION

The only Kitaro titles released on British DVD were two Japanese live-action films from 2007-8, brought to Britain by Manga Entertainment as *Kitaro* and *Kitaro and the Millennium Curse*. Despite its limited effects, the first film is great fun, in a raucous *Monkey!* way. A success in Japan, it’s credited with bolstering the Kitaro franchise at a time when it was faltering. The sequel had a bigger budget, but it was disjointed and plodding, though a poo-throwing monster lifts things up.

WORDS BY ADAM MILLER

WHAT DOES YOUR BLOOD SAY ABOUT YOU?

Japanese blood type traits explained

WHEN I FIRST got to Japan I had to deal with a lot of cultural quirks, like people telling me I had a tiny head, a “tall” nose, or long arms as a way of complimenting me (at last, my gangly torso was admired!). But one oddity that I have never really got on board with was that our blood type can contribute to (or even determine) our personality.

In Japan, it is widely regarded that each of the blood types is associated with very particular personality traits, and that you can guess someone’s blood type as easily as guessing what type of music they listen to. After having my very first blood test for my annual health check, I thought I would finally discover my own blood type. This provided the perfect opportunity to delve into what our blood says about us – apart from all the really important stuff, y’know, to do with medical diagnoses and such...

TYPE A: LIGHT YAGAMI

The most sensible amongst us are said to be Type A. Imagine a person who loves being organised, is never late and is equal parts cautious and responsible... it may sound like I have just described Japanese public transport, but anyone who has folders mapping out their daily routine is normally Type A. Some of the lesser-loved traits of the Type A clan is that they can be determined to a fault, rigid and a little obsessive.

Light takes all of the calculating and cautious aspects of Type A blood types and turns them into a terrifyingly effective and cold temperament. Despite his penchant for murder and self-preservation, he is extremely diligent and organised.

TYPE B: NARUTO UZUMAKI

The stereotype of a tormented artist who is undeniably talented but extremely socially irresponsible is Type B down to a tee. They are said to be the life and soul of a party... if they even bother turning up for the thing in the first place. Widely seen as creative, dynamic and outgoing, Type Bs often have their qualities outweighed by being selfish, unreliable and a little kooky. There is a phrase in Japan, “my pace”, which describes people doing things in their own time, and these common offenders are assumed to be Type B.

Naruto’s out-going nature and love of a good time is often overshadowed with his tendency to lose his temper quickly. Whilst he might not be selfish, and is usually more than willing to stand up for his friends, he can be

sidetracked or distracted by something he finds appealing... bowls of ramen for example have stopped him from an important mission or two.

TYPE AB: HOTARU TOMOE (SAILOR SATURN)

Predictably, AB Types are basically a highbred of Type A and B, being creative yet sensible, intelligent yet indecisive, social yet aloof. The cynical side of me might see this as the catch-all group, when you can’t decide what box a person neatly fits into, you’ll assume they are AB, and if you guess correctly once out of four times, you’ll continue believing you have the ability to guess someone’s blood type. But the fact I will passive-aggressively denounce a pseudoscience then spend time researching an article celebrating it may well lead you to believe I am AB... either way, it might be a little difficult to win the favour of an AB type, but once you do, they’ll be loyal forever (being possessive is another of their common traits).

Sailor Saturn is the perfect mix of someone who is difficult to get along with, but loyal to the end once you manage to squeeze into her inner circle. She has the power to heal, but also the ability to destroy entire planets with a single swipe of her Silence Glaive, and someone as temperamental as a Type AB can be very dangerous with such high levels of responsibility.

TYPE O: RYU

The Gordon Geckos of the world, cold-hearted and determined, these lot are often the powerful ruling classes, who have clawed their way to the top with sheer determination. They might be athletic or have a penchant for earning money, but in either case they will scramble to the top of their chosen field in any way possible (those are considered the good traits by the way).

In terms of achieving peak performance in your chosen field, Ryu from the *Street Fighter* series is a perfect example. Through extensive training and pure grit, he has become one of the best fighters in history. His currency is pride and honour, not money, but he has earned respect in abundance, and all through his own hard work.

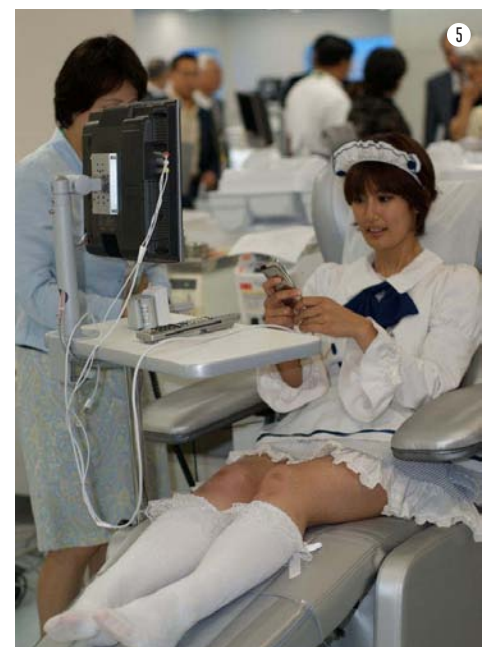
SO WHAT AM I?

Whether you think blood types can influence the kind of people we are or not, it is nice that the vast majority of characters from Japanese pop-culture have been given their own blood type; it shows that their creators have truly thought about what kind of person they are, and it is a great foundation to build up from.

As for me, my blood results came back yesterday and the good news is I am in perfect health. The bad news is that they didn’t tell me what blood type I am. Being terrified of needles and not that worried about knowing what category I fall into, I’ll probably go another year before making sure my next health check reveals who I really am...this lackadaisical response to life may well mean I’m an AB, the least likeable of blood types apparently, or maybe I’m type A because I never miss a deadline (an in-joke for the tormented editor).

I’ll be sure to keep you posted, and if the public demands, I will do my duty and get another blood test – I’ve already produced sweat and tears for my NEO articles, might as well add a little blood to complete the trifecta. ●

“IN JAPAN, IT IS REGARDED THAT EACH OF THE BLOOD TYPES IS ASSOCIATED WITH VERY PARTICULAR PERSONALITY TRAITS, AND THAT YOU CAN GUESS SOMEONE’S BLOOD TYPE AS EASILY AS GUESSING WHAT TYPE OF MUSIC THEY LISTEN TO.”



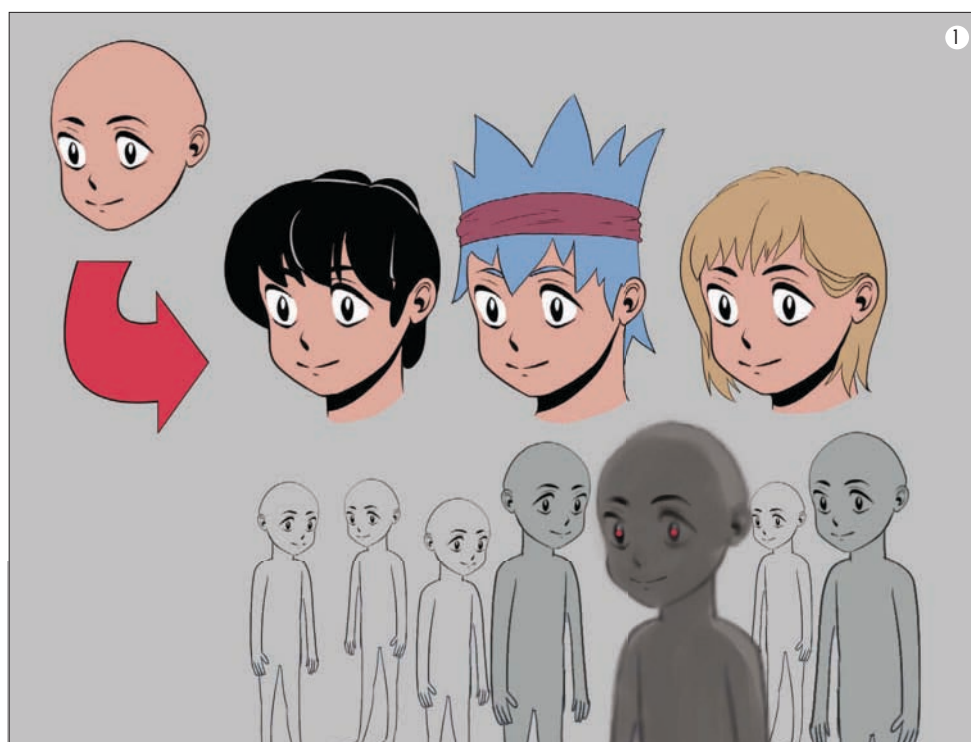
1. Light Yagami is the poster boy for Type A. 2. Lovable, talented and irresponsible, who else could we select to represent Type B than Naruto?! 3. Sailor Saturn. Not all Type ABs can destroy planets, but if they could, they would. 4. If Ryu wasn't a character in a fighting game, he'd probably own a pharmaceutical company. Maybe. 5. The akiba:F Blood Donation Room in Akihabara. Donate blood in true otaku fashion!

Akiba 2 by Steve Nagata (licensed by CC BY 2.0 <https://bit.ly/2JGHR7W>)

MANGA SCHOOL With Leeann Hamilton

MAKING DIVERSE CHARACTERS

Character-based projects, no matter how big or small, work by the strength of not just personalities but how their appearances contrast against each other. A great character design inspires fan art, makes for great cosplays, and – in the big world of business – accrues profit in the form of merchandise. But how does one attempt to bottle such charisma? Let me know when you find out, but here's some steps to help get you started!

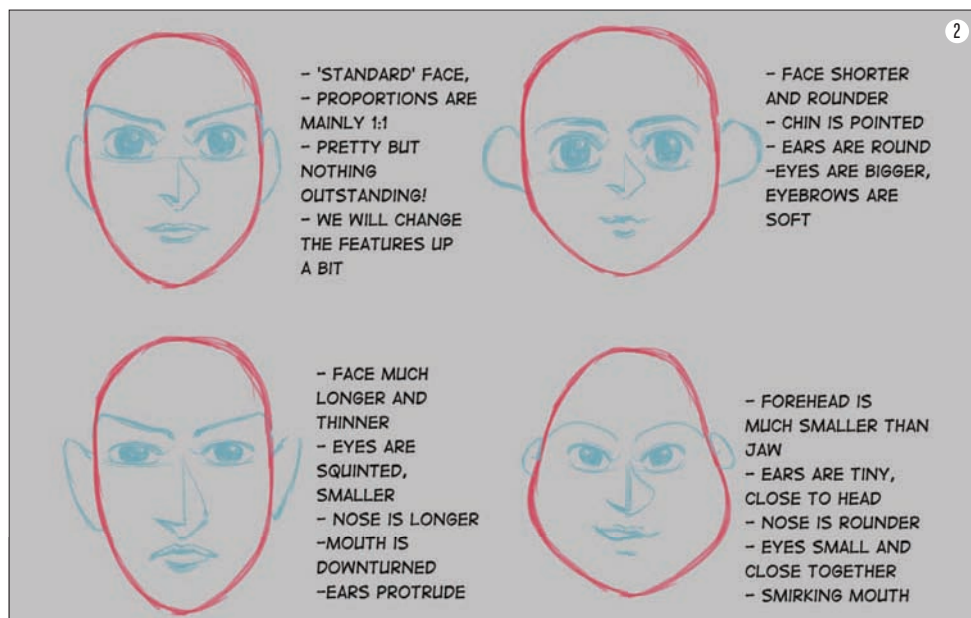


1. SAME FACE SYNDROME

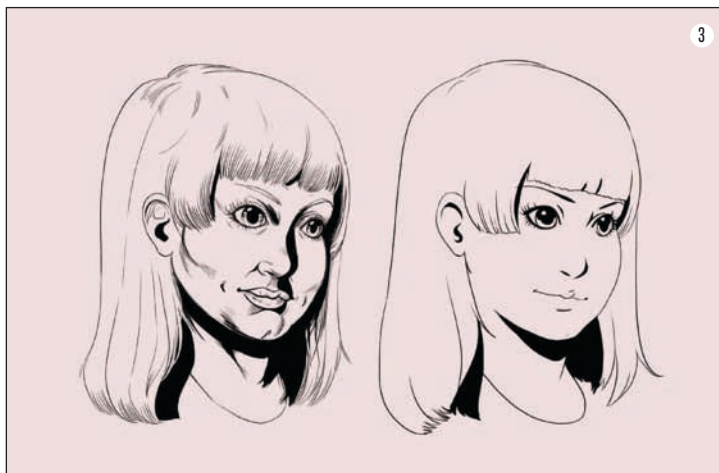
Let's address the elephant in the room first – sometimes your favourite media has flaws. One likely flaw is characters having no design beyond changing the eye and hair colours between them. You could mentally change out the character's hair like a wig, place it on another character, and that's it. Easy for a beginner artist (or an artist stuck for time) to do, but they're left with a veritable clone army running around. And getting away with this will leave the audience feeling tired very quick.

2. A SKULLHOUSE OF BRAINY STUDENTS?

Ditch the wigs and lenses for a moment, and you're left with bald, neutral characters. We can start by adjusting the width and length of the facial features to completely transform the 'aura' or presence of the character. This is achieved by adjusting the width of the face, via the forehead, cheeks and jaw, as well as adjusting the length of the head. It also helps with keeping consistency and harmony within one design. (Breaking design harmony for example, is drawing a middle aged plump pirate with realistic proportions, but his face has chibi manga facial proportions just because the rest of the cast does.)



Building a big cast of varied characters might seem daunting, but try our tips to get started on creating your very own. Nobody wants a cast of clones (unless that's your storyline...), so branch out and see what you can achieve with our handy tutorial!



3. DRAWING THE LINE AT DRAWING LINES

While an under sketch could include extra structural lines, shading, and indicating fat/muscle, not ALL of it has to be inked over or emphasized in the final design. Over rendering a character's features knocks their identity out of whack – extra hatching on the face is often interpreted as wrinkles, making the character look older than anticipated. Over inking the drawing could drop it into the Uncanny Valley, a place where things that try to look human instead revulse the audience. If this wasn't your original intent, reconsider how you apply the 'top coat' to the drawing's structure. More appeal may just mean simpler rendering, if you don't intend to scare people away!

4. HANDLING DIVERSITY, OR REPRESENTING PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT YOU

Various media has taken care – whether subtle or ham fisted – to diversify the lead cast of characters within their project. A loud minority might scream this down as political correctness, but the majority of your audience will appreciate more representation of 'themselves' reflected in particular characters. Following a character in a story, one that relates to you the most, is also akin to that character being your avatar in that universe. This is very true for women, POC, LGBT+, and even age and ability groups. Many media companies and institutions try to reach out to these groups to ignite an inclusive passion in hobbies such as gaming, comics, animation, movies, music, art and cosplay via the presence of lead characters and actors.

Resorting to a stereotype, or making a minority an easy target for tired story tropes and characterisation, severely damages not just the work and creator's reputation, but the reader's trust toward the media's unaffected fandom. Acknowledging that some of your own favourite works could offend, and *NOT* bitterly defending that hard fact against people who *are* offended and hurt, is a massive leap closer to maturity and understanding.



5. TO MAKE AN OMELETTE, BREAK SOME EGGS(PECTATIONS)

If you can upskill enough to consider a range of body shapes, skin colours, facial types, fashions and personalities with your design, you're less likely to fall into a trap of similar, weakly cloned character designs. You can draw an entire cast at a thumbnail level and see if you can spot their differences. Sticking to a comfort zone not only hurts your work, but leaves the work isolated from a rich pool of learning, practicing and growing. So keep looking beyond and stay positive!



ART TOOLS: CHAMELEON PENS

Chameleon Color Tones is an innovative marker system, where a single marker allows you to achieve multiple tones. The Deluxe Set of 20 markers allows you to get over 100 tones, and the new palette of 30 new colours (50 in total) will leave artists with endless possibilities. Visit www.chameleonpens.com!



[ANIME REVIEW]

GIRLISH NUMBER

Voice-acting Vices

28 MAY // MVM // TBC // SLICE OF LIFE // £29.99 (DVD), £34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 288 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT Chitose Karasuma is an aspiring voice actress who wants to become popular with minimal work. When the chance is afforded to her, she quickly learns that maybe she, and her incredibly large ego, isn't prepared for a lead role after all.

Girlish Number focuses on voice-acting and all aspects of it – behind the scenes, the industry, marketing and all that the voice talent has to do outside of voicing their characters. Unfortunately for her grand ambitions, Chitose is lazy and blames others for her own problems, leaving her brother exasperated at his attempts to help her as a talent manager.

It seems like Chitose is a protagonist who's hard to root for, thanks to her duplicitous nature and her uncharitable internal monologue. However, she does develop as a character as the show goes on, and despite having many of the traits which would usually make someone insufferable, it's nearly impossible to hate her – she's cheeky and ungrateful, and you might not want her as a friend, but

even she learns that she needs to work hard if she wants to achieve her lofty dreams of being a well-loved voice-actress. It's satisfying to see Chitose grow into a professional voice-actress who is worthy of a lead role, and along the way, *Girlish Number* provides an enlightening look at the art of voice-acting.

Okay, so maybe this isn't exactly a documentary, but following the hard slog from bit-part to lead actress to household name means that *Girlish Number* doesn't only focus on the thrills and joy of doing what you love, but it also exposes the sheer amount of dedication required to make it big.

You're not going to find a blueprint to success here if you're an aspiring voice actor yourself, although lessons such as learning to accept criticism and to study source material are ones you should quickly learn – or know – already. In fact, the story could apply to pretty much any industry and those who think they can climb the ladder with minimum effort. There's a harsh truth on display here: sometimes even when you know what the problem is, it can still be difficult to change.

Anime that focuses on real-world occupations make for an interesting watch thanks partly to their fly-on-the-wall insights into the working world in Japan, and the anime industry link only adds to that here. *Girlish Number* will keep your rapt attention even if you do find yourself groaning at Chitose's ridiculous attitude towards work and her co-workers.

YOU'RE NO AMATEUR

Chitose may be an amateur voice-actress but the talent who voices her, Sayaka Senbongi, has notable roles in various anime including *Clockwork Planet* and *Violet Evergarden*.



It's not only Chitose and the other voice talent who are having a difficult time though, because her brother and manager, Gojo, as well as the animating team, face daily pressure in getting the show off the ground. The producers constantly come up with money-making ideas which Gojo then must begrudgingly attempt to make a reality, and to say that there are communication issues is an understatement. It's no surprise then when their first episode airs to little fanfare! Creative talent can easily be stifled if management

"THERE'S A HARSH TRUTH ON DISPLAY HERE: SOMETIMES EVEN WHEN YOU KNOW WHAT THE PROBLEM IS, IT CAN STILL BE DIFFICULT TO CHANGE."

doesn't have a clear understanding of their work, and *Girlish Number* isn't afraid to show that.

Twelve episodes of voice-acting goodness is wonderfully animated by studio Diomedéa, who are best known for their work on *Squid Girl* and *Kantai Collection*. *Girlish Number* really is among their best works, but no studio has been attached to spin-off series *Girlish Number Shura* just yet.

Girlish Number is a gorgeous anime with grounded character designs and a peaceful, warm atmosphere, so

don't expect anything flashy or otherworldly. Its visuals fit the narrative and much of the wonder is to be found in the character's facial expressions. Combined with the dialogue, there's a lot to enjoy here – particularly Chitose's inner grandiose ramblings, even if they can be painful to listen to at times.

Outside of its excellent voice-acting there are also a handful of catchy songs to enjoy. The in-show producers want the voice-actresses to double as idols, so that they can perform songs live at various events (in the hopes that this will bring in huge crowds who will then support the show, of course). Chitose's attention-seeking personality gives her the confidence she needs on stage, but she's acutely aware that this somewhat off-putting persona needs to be hidden carefully from the fans.

A lot of thought has gone into *Girlish Number* and it doesn't brush the stress and troubles of working in the industry under the rug. Those hoping for something a little more light-hearted may be disappointed, but *Girlish Number*'s humour, narrative, insight and development make it worth your time.

***Girlish Number* is an entertaining look into the voice-acting industry and its many aspects, but it's also an enjoyable look into how Chitose grows from a spoilt child into a respectable voice-actress. Check this one out if voice-acting interests you, or if you enjoyed *New Game!* and *Shirobako*. ●**

★★★★☆

CONQUER THE WORLD

Girlish Number's anime series is only a part of a multimedia project which also includes novels and manga. A four-panel manga spinoff, *Shura*, is getting an anime adaptation too. Author Wataru Watari also pens *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, which is his most popular work to date.

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特集



NURSEMEN?

If you're wondering where the men are, only 6.2% of nurses in Japan are male, and that represents a sizeable increase over the last decade. Mid-career nurses actually earn slightly more than their office-worker equivalents, although many are still put off by the long hours and the continued assumption that it is "women's work."

表紙イラスト／島津郷子

MANGA SNAPSHOT

NURSE STORIES

Jonathan Clements empties the manga bedpan

ISSUE #0 // DEBUT YEAR: 2018 // PAGE COUNT: 520 // PUBLISHER: MEDIAX // PRICE: 690 YEN (£4.73) // CYCLE: OCCASIONAL

“TEARS. EMOTIONS! LIFE’S ties woven with tears.” No chance of any laughs, then? It’s *Nurse Stories* (1) from MediAx, a publisher we have previously observed in these pages getting all corporate and experimental with a roster of lady’s manga. MediAx is plainly sitting on an archive of romance manga, and its editors are shuffling them around, trying to see a new angle that nobody has tried yet, just in case it grows into a genre all of its own.

Nurse Stories is an experimental spin-off from *15 Love Stories* (NEO 127) a manga magazine dedicated to romance. Plainly, the editors think that medical storylines alone represent enough of a niche to be their own magazine. And why not? Since the earliest days of Mills & Boon, nursing stories have presented a chance to show a caring side and make a useful contribution to society, while also placing women in professions that are eternally unthreatening to the establishment. It has long been a truism in Japanese dating that a girl who didn’t want to rock the boat or offend the tender sensibilities of her would-be husband should have something on her educational resumé that looked like a wife-in-waiting – something classy for entertaining, like flower arranging, or useful to motherhood, like child psychology. Or maybe even something that marked her out as the best of all possible daughter-in-laws – nursing. Times change, of course, and the picture I’m painting is from the dying days of marriage brokers and conservative customs of the mid-20th century. But that’s still a powerful pull on genres and story-making.

TV writers love hospitals because outside stories come to the standing sets. You can cram your waiting room with farmers one week, a reception class the next, and in one memorable episode of the Japanese TV drama *24-Hour ER*, with an entire hen party of women dressed in sexy nurse’s outfits. Imagine the confusion! Eriko Okamura’s *Nurse Call* (2), an ongoing series, focuses largely on the patients in this way, but also exploiting the potential of manga to expand the settings for little more than the price of ink. Nurse Yoko can’t help but notice the doleful man who sits on a park bench on her way to work – she remembers discharging him only a few days earlier, but he doesn’t seem to have anywhere to go. She tries to engage him in conversation, revealing in her dialogue that she thinks he is maybe facing a mid-life crisis.

Of course it’s a crisis – he’s been let go, aged 28.

“Oh,” she realises, “*risutora*.” Restructuring – Japan’s way of saying that he’s been downsized, laid off, or otherwise surplus to requirements, barely a few years into the salaryman job that was supposed to last him until retirement. Asami sits with him in the cold park, sipping warm alcopops, and gives him a gentle pep talk about how his whole life is ahead of him – an innocent albeit

simplistic extension of her pastoral duties. Meanwhile, back at the hospital, the pointedly male doctors rant about how the unreliable Nurse Asami has failed to show up for work yet again, gently nudging home Okamura’s theme: that nursing is not a job, but a vocation.

Asami is back in another story right away, unable to resist the prospect of cocktails and free food at a singles mixer “Viking” – see sidebar. A man accidentally upends his drink over her, but then again, by volunteering to get it cleaned, now he has her number (3). What a rat! You’d think that might be the story in this chapter, but the cocktail dunking was merely a diversion from Asami’s daily life, which includes breaking the news to an incredulous family that their mother has three months to live.

NURSE STATION

The other big nursing manga series, running for 20 years and 20 volumes from 1991–2011, was Kyoko Shimazu’s *Nurse Station* (4). I am very surprised to see it here, because it originally ran in Shueisha’s *Office You* magazine, and Shimazu must have had heavy clout indeed to somehow wrest the rights from her publishers and lend them to MediAx’s little spin-off. And yet, here it is, an episode in the life of Keiko Nakayama, a super-efficient nurse who sees that it is not merely the health of a mother-and-daughter in-patient pair that needs fixing. The estranged parents of little Momo are at odds about what matters in life – Dad only cares about her grades; Mum knows that the thing she loves the most is the piano. Keiko thinks that both of them maybe need to dial it down a little bit and let her *enjoy being a child*, which is an oddly counter-intuitive thing to say in a Japanese comic, since nothing brings out the training montages and sacrifices like a desire for a career in the arts.

But that’s actually rather a pleasant change. Artist Shimazu doesn’t present Momo as a future concert pianist, just as a girl who likes the piano. Nobody has unrealistic expectations of her in life, but her parents could just do with getting a bit of a clue.

Because *Nurse Station* has already ended, we can catch a glimpse on how Keiko’s life is going to pan out. She has come to Tokyo from her home town of Matsuyama, in part to escape the interference of her widowed mother. She is free to live as she wants in Tokyo, but work soon takes over her life. She falls in love with a patient, although he dies. She meets the love of her life through another patient, but breaks up with him because his work takes him to New York. She advances >>>



WHAT ABOUT THE ADS?

The implied reader of *Nurse Stories* like cakes, cats and domestic tourism. If she's not single, then she may well be a middle-aged housewife getting the most out of a newly empty nest – taking in train trips to temples and loading up her phone with romance novels. That, at least, is the message sent by the advertising, which pushes excursions on public transport and publications about pets.

>>> through the ranks to become so senior that she risks being promoted out of nursing into management, only to quit her job when the mother she complains about all the time suddenly falls seriously ill.

It is a familiar template from many a conservative TV drama – whatever the allure of the big city, home is where the heart is, and a return there is the ultimate test of loyalty and love. Which brings us to our happy end – the New York ex makes the journey all the way to Matsuyama himself, to propose. Keiko's working life hence ends with a demonstration of her filial piety, and the “reward” of marriage. Your mileage may vary.

PINK COLLARS

The first nursing school was opened in Japan by foreign missionaries in 1883; the Japanese Red Cross began training its own nurses in 1890, right at the start of Japan's expansion era. Nursing in early 20th century Japan was hence a prominent and visible display of patriotism – the first Red Cross class hadn't even graduated before they were packed off to serve in the Sino-Japanese War.

However, despite its sophisticated demands, multiple roles and life-saving reputation, nursing remained a form of labour in Japan that I blush to call unskilled. The first university-level nursing courses in Japan were not introduced until 1952, and the term “nurse” in Japanese continues to embrace a wide range of professions, including registered nurses (backed by a three-year education programme), public health nurses, midwives and assistant nurses. It's this last category that seems particularly compelling to manga publishers, because it sits on the very cusp of not being qualified at all – you can get certified as an assistant



nurse by cramming a course in just a few weeks, but there is still a desperate shortage, mainly because of the vast expansion of Japan's requirements for care of the elderly. This brings it into the “pink collar sector” – of jobs that are not technically manual labour, concentrated in the caring professions and overwhelmingly staffed by women.

A “nurse” in Japan is hence a category encompassing everything from teenage drop-outs working in an old people's home, housebound carers for the elderly and disabled, low-ranking personnel at hospitals and the registered staff who order them around, right the way up to mid-career professionals with managerial responsibilities and specialist paramedics whose qualifications and experience probably outclass many of the younger doctors around them. Since a change to the law in 2015, certain nurses can now even make diagnoses, issue minor prescriptions and start treatments without waiting for a doctor to sign off. But this magazine isn't called *Medical Stories*, or *Doctors and Nurses* – it keeps its focus on the subalterns of the hospital and clinic, which makes me think that it expects readers who identify more with the lower ranks.

Some of the stories are stretching the bounds of relevance for a magazine with this title. There's a nurse in Mei Kawasaki's *Can I Carry This Life* (5), but that hardly makes it a nursing story. Instead, it's the tale of a young married couple who discover that they will be expecting their second child. The wife is happy; the husband is stressed beyond belief. How can he possibly afford it? He isn't ready!

Talking like that in a British household would most likely get the man a slap, but being Japanese, the wife indulges his “fears” for a while before persuading him to go through the agonies of watching her be pregnant for nine months and then give birth.



"SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF MILLS & BOON, NURSING STORIES HAVE PRESENTED A CHANCE TO SHOW A CARING SIDE AND MAKE A USEFUL CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY, WHILE ALSO PLACING WOMEN IN PROFESSIONS THAT ARE ETERNALLY UNTHREATENING TO THE ESTABLISHMENT."

He eventually tells her how grateful he is for bringing their daughter into their life, although I will observe that the whole story comes framed by a device in which the daughter is happily playing at a coffee morning somewhere, and two mothers begin talking about how she came into the world. I can only surmise that this opening sequence is deliberately designed to calm any triggering fears on the reader's part that this might turn into a story about abortion, which does indeed seem to be looming large in the mid-section conversations.

Diaries of the Arisu Animal Hospital (6) by Memi Hoshino crams itself into the issue with a subtitle explaining that it's a story of animal nurse. I knew a girl from Newcastle that was called the Animal Nurse, but that's another story. This one is actually about vets, and is set in a clinic right next to a children's school to ensure that all the drama is doubled. The kids care about their pets, but they are also conveniently clueless about their care, allowing the vets in charge to explain at length without patronising the reader. In this case, a little girl keeps on bringing in an injured rabbit, unaware that she has been putting him in a hutch with another rabbit that is bound to attack him over space and resources.

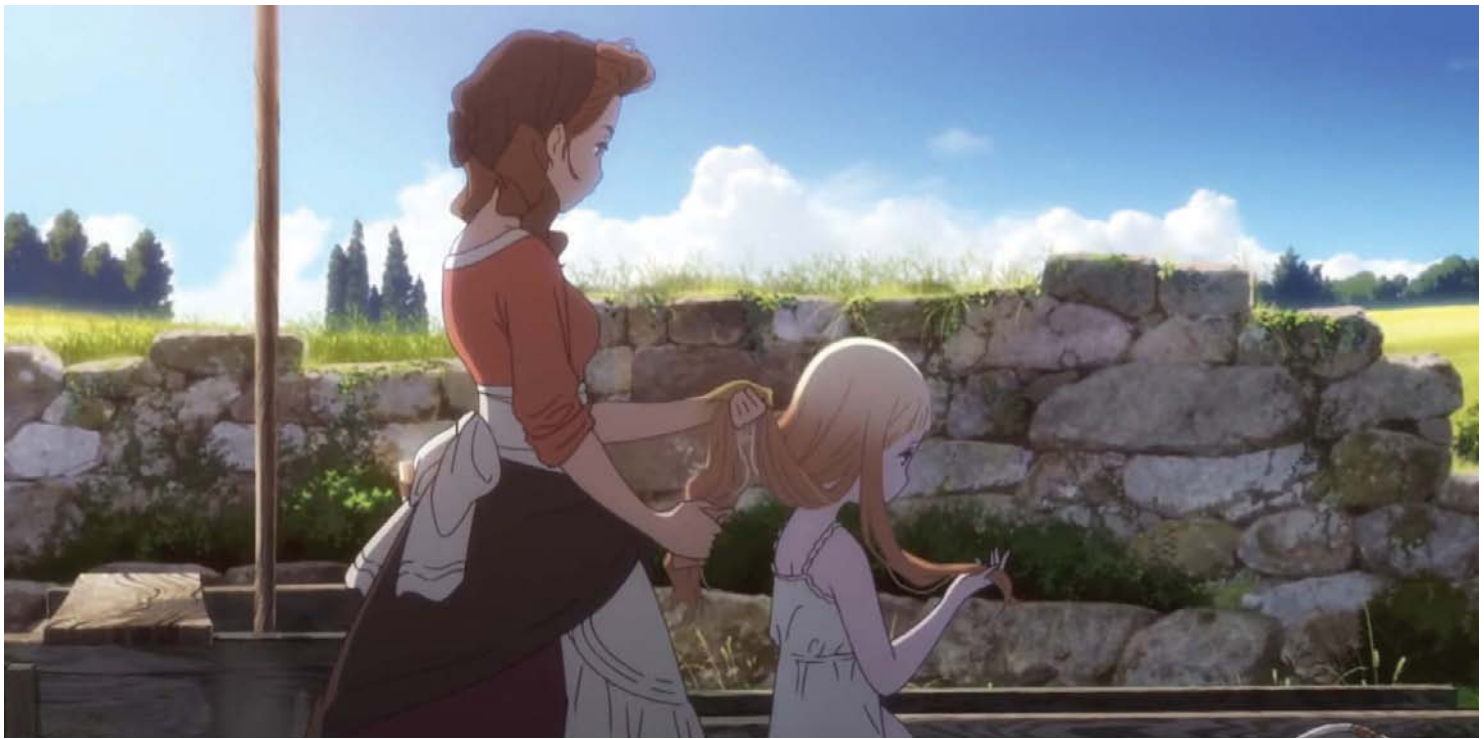
Thankfully, there hasn't been a whole lot of tears, despite the promise on the cover. Hospital romance is the main order of the day in other stories, such as *Waltz* (7) by Motoko Fukuda. But not every passion is romantic. Yawara Goto's *Angel Diaries* (8) is about a bespectacled public health nurse who wanders the suburbs solving problems like Kane from *Kung Fu*. She barges into other people's lives and fixes their health and relationship issues, with a footprint of pastoral care somewhere between priest and doctor. She's the embodiment of a term that keeps cropping up in the *Nurse Stories* taglines – nekketsu. Literally "hot-blooded", it tends to show up in sporting manga to describe driven winners, but here it seems far gentler. It means women who get to be proud of being obsessed with their job, because their job means saving lives and mending hearts. ●

WHAT ARE THE HOURS?

In Japan, nurses commonly work 24-hour shifts, one day on, one day off. Which probably explains why the Japanese are investing so much in the automation of nursing work, because only a robot could keep to that schedule and not go mental.

ZERO RISK?

Three volumes of *Nurse Call* were dumped on the English comics market in 2017 from Beagle in Kindle-only form, which leads me to suspect that this was one of the cultural artefacts to benefit from a J-LOP grant. The Japanese government pays for marketing and translation. All you have to pay for is print costs... which for a Kindle edition are zero!



THE NEW QUEEN OF FANTASY

Anime's hottest new director is a writer who doesn't draw, so how did Mari Okada go from crafting screenplays by herself to becoming a fully-fledged filmmaker on *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*? NEO's David West meets the debut director to find out.

ANIME IS FULL of famous directors – Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai are synonymous with the medium – but it is not a business known for making stars out of writers. Mari Okada is a very prominent exception to that rule.

Whether working on her own original concepts, like *anohana* and *The Anthem Of The Heart*, or writing for franchises such as *Black Butler* and *Vampire Knight*, Okada has become one of anime's best known and most popular screenwriters. Now, with her directorial debut *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*, she establishes herself as not just one of the most imaginative writers in the industry, but one of anime's most exciting filmmakers.

It's the heart-wrenching and exquisitely beautiful story of Maquia, an immortal woman, raising a human boy called Erial. Okada has come a long way from a childhood where she struggled with an abusive mother and crippling social anxiety, as described in her autobiography published last April in Japan. When NEO meets Okada in London, she's clearly excited about the critical and commercial success of her directorial debut.

"I always felt that there were some things I couldn't do as a screenwriter and although I always imagined what things would look like as I was writing, I was never involved in actually creating the visual side of a story, so it would never look the way I thought it would. I wanted to try being involved in every step of the creation and to share my vision with the rest of the team," says Okada.

BREAKING ALL THE RULES

Where most directors come from art backgrounds, Okada has no artistic training, so she had to learn how to communicate with her team of designers and animators. "At first, I didn't know the rules," she says. "I didn't know how it

works on the ground, what the director says to get people to do what they want them to do, so I think I got it wrong quite a bit at the start. I went too far. In an attempt to try to get people to understand the characters I would give them lots of details like, this character, in certain situations, scratches their lower back, and I was told that they really didn't need that much detail. I really didn't know how to get people to understand what I wanted, I could say the same thing and in different departments some would understand, and some wouldn't. There is a lot of specialist vocabulary."

Fortunately, Okada had three years to take *Maquia* from page to screen. "Although in the first year I found it hard to communicate what I wanted, from the second year onwards I worked out how to get the results I wanted. I was so lucky to have a really enthusiastic team, so we could keep talking and communicating until we understood each other," she says. "When I was writing, I always had an idea of what I wanted the director to do with my scripts, so I wanted to be the kind of director that I wanted to work with as a writer, but I realised that everyone wants something different from the director. What I want from a director, as a writer, is someone who inspires me but who gives me a challenge that I can then solve, rather than very detailed instructions. But I discovered that some of the staff do want those detailed instructions, and some, like me, don't. Patience really is important for a director because at the same time as making the best film possible, you're also having to create the best relationships that you can with your team."

A WEAVER OF TALES

Another new experience for Okada was working with the voice actors who



The Perfectionist

"The head of the studio was happy with what I produced because I produced because he wanted me to write what I wanted to write," says Okada about writing *Maquia*. "That actually made me stricter towards my own screenplay than I would be usually. Everyone was saying, 'That's fine,' but I kept re-writing."



"AT FIRST, I DIDN'T KNOW THE RULES. I DIDN'T KNOW HOW IT WORKS ON THE GROUND, WHAT THE DIRECTOR SAYS TO GET PEOPLE TO DO WHAT THEY WANT THEM TO DO, SO I THINK I GOT IT WRONG QUITE A BIT AT THE START. I WENT TOO FAR."

brought her characters to life. Often in the past, she's had a particular voice actor in mind while writing a character, but not on this occasion.

"This time we had auditions and Manaka Iwami, who plays Maquia, was a real newcomer," she explains. "She's got a very pure voice and there are certain things I think only she could have done. A lot of actresses auditioned for the role but there was one scene in particular when Maquia tells Erial off and she acted it exactly the way that I imagined it when I was writing it."

"I couldn't understand how she could do this when this was pretty much her first time voice acting. After we'd chosen her for the role, I was talking with her and it turned out that the reason she wanted to become a voice actor was because she liked my work and she'd watched everything I'd worked on, so I think my dialogue really resonated with her."

When the film begins, Maquia lives in a remote community of immortals who spend their time weaving huge tapestries that contain a chronicle of their world. It's tempting to see a parallel with Okada's own life as a writer, although when asked if there's an autobiographical element in Maquia's character, Okada replies, "Maybe. Her clan live for a very long time and the idea is that the place

where they live is all carved out of a single rock, all the towers and bridges, which has only been possible because they live for so long.

"They weave the whole history of their world in their cloth, but they themselves live a very static life. They carve the rock, they weave what's going on in the world around them, but they maintain their status quo. They like that way of life, but then in leaving, they move from a static, protected world to one where there is nothing to protect you and life is dynamic. That's how the story is set in motion and maybe in that sense it's similar to my life, going from writing alone to working with everyone else."

Catch Okada's spectacular vision on the big screen – *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms* opens in cinemas on 27 June from Anime Ltd. ●

FANTASY INSPIRATIONS

"I grew up loving video games, I particularly liked Akihiko Yoshida's *Ogre Battle* series and he did the character designs for *Maquia*," says Okada. Similarly, Ryo Mizuno's *Record Of Lodoss War*, a novel series that spawned manga, anime and video games adaptations, helped feed her love of the fantasy genre.



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BIOGRAPHY

I've liked drawing since I was young, but it was always just a hobby. Along the way, I met like-minded friends and gradually got more into it. They would often offer advice or little tidbits of information about the field, for which I am grateful.

I would often browse websites such as Pixiv where many artists upload their art, and aspired to draw like many of them.

Back then, I used to draw with pencil and paper, but nowadays I draw almost entirely digitally, using the Wacom Intuos Pro tablet, as well as the drawing software Clip Studio Paint.

I am currently drawing with Collateral Damage Studios and have just completed a colouring book published under Colouring Heaven.

I like to come up with original designs, and looking at actual outfits allows the designs to have a more realistic feel. If I am drawing fanart instead, I feel it would be important to know the character before drawing to convey the character better. So I refer to the original illustrations, as well as the source material before I draw a character.



INSPIRATION

Manga, games, Japanese street fashions, Pixiv, and Vocaloid.

My interest in fashion means that I can use actual outfits as my reference points to draw better costumes!

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If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.



1. Harvest Moon Miku: I made this fanart of Hatsune Miku during the Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Harvest Moon Festival. Hatsune Miku is the persona of one of the singing synthesizer applications developed by Crypton Future Media. **2. Magical Mirai 2017 Miku:** Magical Mirai is an annual event and concert. They have a new design for Hatsune Miku each year specifically for the event. I had the opportunity to visit that event for that year, and it was great! **3. Haru:** I had fun coming up with the outfit for this piece which is meant to be for a standee for promotional purposes. Haru is a character under Collateral Damage Studios.



*I'm full of
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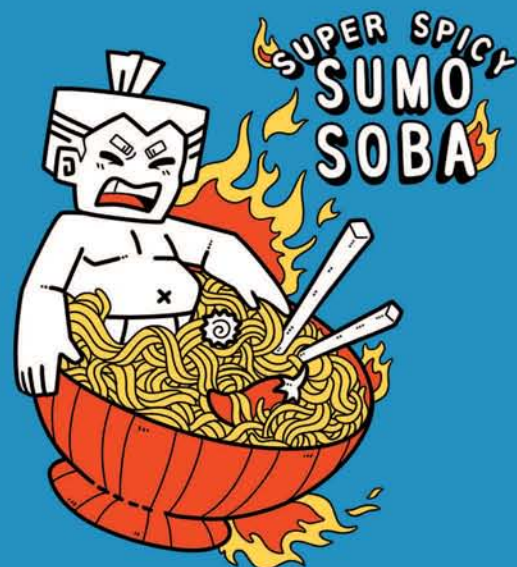
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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

A TRIBUTE TO ISAO TAKAHATA

From his early fascination with French animation, to his work on one of the most celebrated anime movies of all time, we look back at the life and career of one of anime's greatest directors

IN REMEMBERING ISAO Takahata, it's worth noting that his most famous film is itself framed as a memorial. *Grave of the Fireflies*, which Takahata directed at Studio Ghibli in 1988, is introduced by a ghost boy. Lit by the red remembered fires of World War II, the ghost declares, "This is the night I died." We see the death itself, the starving boy slumping to a station floor. But then we go back in time, to when the boy was alive and determined to live, experiencing war pungently and vividly, absolutely committed to protecting his little sister. The audience has just been spoiled, told how his life (and his sister's) will end before the main story even begins. But no-one complains that a funeral service tells us how the dead person lived.

It's a cliché that *Grave* is the Great Anime Film no-one sees twice, an intensely sad story of the lives and deaths of a girl and boy in wartime Japan. But if you *do* bring yourself to rewatch *Grave*, you'll find it has a great many moments of happiness and spontaneous joy, be it the simple preparation of an outdoor meal, or the little girl capering ecstatically amid the fireflies. Everyone remembers the dying scenes, which are indeed depicted with an intensity and intimacy more like live theatre than animation. But *Grave* is fundamentally about living.

The film's own requiem in its last minutes is no howl of grief, no scorching polemic. Instead, it's one more time leap, one last sight of a person no longer here but who once was. Set at the lakeside where much of the film takes place, it shows incidental moments from the girl's life; silly, curious, playful, wholly open to the marvels of the world. The requiem is set to a painfully sweet Italian rendering of the song, "There's no place like home."

For many Anglophone viewers, *Grave* was their first introduction to Takahata. Appearing on US videotape in 1993 from Central Park Media, it showed *Akira* fans that anime could be, unquestionably, high art. But it's debatable if *Grave* is representative of Takahata, if *any* of his works over six decades are. Unlike Miyazaki, Oshii, Kon or Shinkai, Takahata has no obvious style or signature. He worked across tragedies and comedies; he took the perspectives of children and adults; he made boy's adventures (*The Little Norse Prince*) and female introspections (*Only Yesterday*).

Takahata worked extensively in cinema anime, but in

volume of hours, he made far more anime for television. Its impact in Japan was incalculable, but *none* of his TV work has been released commercially in Britain or America. It's too old, and it wasn't made for demographics who watch *Naruto* or *Attack on Titan*. You can go to a British retailer and pick up nearly all the anime directed by Miyazaki or Shinkai, but a very large part of Takahata's work will probably never have a British release. In effect, Takahata had a whole other career we never got to see.

EARLY DAYS

Takahata was born in 1935, in a peninsula city then called Ujimyamada, now named Ise. His family moved to another city, Okayama, in 1943. Takahata was almost the same generation as Seita, the fictional boy in *Grave*, and Takahata knew Seita's terror for real. Aged nine, he was caught in an air raid, running with his sister through his blazing home town. In *Grave*, Takahata recreated this memory, preserving his lived experience more vividly than any camcorder.

After the war, Takahata studied French literature at Tokyo university. Among the contemporary French poets he discovered was Jacques Prévert, who'd scripted a strange, dreamlike fairy-tale cartoon feature. Originally called *The Shepherdess and the Sweep*, it showed two children racing around a massive castle that's actually a totalitarian city.

Takahata was beguiled by the film. Years later he would borrow a print for his animation colleagues and study it through the night, analysing it from all angles. Takahata's subsequent work would often feel closer to cultured "world" animation – think of *Persepolis* or *The Illusionist* – than to commercial anime. It's especially fitting that Takahata's last film credit, as producer, would be on another French-animated cartoon, 2016's *The Red Turtle*. As for *Shepherdess and the Sweep*, it was revised by its director Paul Grimault and is now on DVD as *The King and the Mockingbird*.

From university, Takahata joined the factory-sized Toei Animation in 1959, already Japan's biggest animation studio. Through the next decade, Takahata's credits would appear on Toei's films and TV shows. Crucially, though, Takahata was never an animator. He did not climb the career ladder through in-betweening and key animation, nor through other drawing departments such as backgrounds or >>>



1. Hilda: the characteristically complex female lead of Takahata's *The Little Norse Prince*.

NOT A WAR FILM

Influential movie critic Roger Ebert considered *Grave of the Fireflies* to be one of the most powerful war films ever made, but Takahata repeatedly refused the anti-war label, stating that *Grave* "is not at all an anti-war anime and contains absolutely no such message." Without a wider context for the conflict, he feared that the movie could just as easily be used to justify military action.

>>> character design. Takahata was "the director who did not draw", which perhaps gave him a more objective eye than his collaborators who did, and a wider sense of what animation could do.

His most famous collaborator, of course, was Hayao Miyazaki, who joined Toei four years after Takahata. We should acknowledge the friction when Takahata's and Miyazaki's names are put together. Miyazaki's is the far "bigger" name commercially, in Japan and worldwide. You can argue that discussing Miyazaki at any length in a Takahata obituary turns an overshadow into an insult, as if *Grave* or *Princess Kaguya* can't stand up by themselves. I interviewed Takahata as part of a Paris press group in 2015. Before we went in, the PR person requested we *not* ask Takahata questions about Miyazaki, as Takahata was angry at how many foreign journalists were doing just that.

And yet, the relationship between Takahata and Miyazaki is deep and fascinating, and both men confirm that it defined their work. For years they worked in tandem, with Takahata in the leading role. In 1968, after many Toei credits as Assistant Director or Storyboard Director, Takahata helmed his first feature, *The Little Norse Prince* (available on British DVD). Made with collectivist ideals, *Prince* drew together ideas from across its staff, including Miyazaki's, but it was Takahata's film.

FROM NORSE PRINCES TO GREEN GABLES

Set in a northern Europe out of legend, *Little Norse Prince* is the story of a boy, Hols, and his efforts to rally a town against an evil warlock. At least that's how it starts. Halfway through, *Prince* changes, anticipating the unorthodox structures of Takahata's later films. Hols, the straightforward hero,

becomes much less central; instead the focus shifts to a girl, Hilda, whom Hols finds in a deserted fishing village, singing serenely and playing a harp. "I'm the happy singing girl," she greets him. Of course, boys and girls meet endlessly, and Miyazaki would imbue similar scenes with his own magic, but Takahata's handling of the meeting in *Hols* is mysterious and unsettling, as much a ghost story as a fairy tale.

Hilda turns out to be an alienated, conflicted spirit, who gradually questions her malign role in a story that she's been parachuted into. She's an early case of what is often described as Takahata's "objective" approach to character. In Takahata's films, characters may not understand themselves or their actions, their contradictions presented without overt comment. In *Grave*, the boy Seita loves his sister but is catastrophically blind to how his decisions are killing her. The father in *Princess Kaguya* is pompous, greedy, selfish – and loving towards his daughter at the same time.

The Little Norse Prince was rejected by its studio, pulled by Toei from Japanese cinemas after ten days. As with other film "flops", the true murderer may have been studio politics; Takahata and Miyazaki were known as left-wingers and troublemakers. Takahata and his allies left Toei soon after, finding work at other studios. NEO readers may have seen *Panda! Go Panda!*, a pair of mid-length cartoons directed by Takahata in 1972-3. (The Japanese title was *Panda Kopanda*, meaning "Panda Pandacub".) While they had western DVD releases thanks to their brevity, and contain elements refined by Miyazaki in *Totoro* and *Ponyo*, prospective viewers should be warned: *Panda* is aimed at *very* young children.

The pandas were a trifle for Takahata, who spent most of the 1970s directing epic TV series. 1974's *Heidi* grew out of Takahata's interest in a different kind of animation;>>>





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"I DON'T THINK AUDIENCES WATCH LIVE-ACTION FEATURES CAREFULLY. HOWEVER, THEY'D BE FORCED TO FOR AN ANIMATED FEATURE, BECAUSE ANIMATION CATCHES THINGS WE DO AND REFLECTS REALITY MORE SOLIDLY THAN IT ACTUALLY IS." TAKAHATA

THE TANUKI OF LEGEND

Whilst tanuki are real animals – a kind of raccoon dog – there's a hefty amount of folklore built up around the creatures in Japan, where their cheeky personalities and magical powers make them a much-loved part of the yokai world. The supernatural tanuki can shapeshift, possess humans, and have enormous testicles – which comes in handy during the action of *Pom Poko*.

>>> cartoons immersing viewers in everyday life, in the real world. For many animation professionals, this would betray what animation was for, telling stories that live-action couldn't do. After all, *Heidi's* story, of a girl growing up in the Swiss Alps and her heartache when she's parted from them, *had* been made in live-action, several times. Takahata, though, argued that animation wasn't just for talking animals or magic effects; it was a way of *seeing* the world.

"I don't think audiences watch live-action features carefully," he said once. "However, they'd be forced to for an animated feature, because animation catches things we do and reflects reality more solidly than it actually is."

Jonathan Clements describes how Takahata and Miyazaki went location hunting in Switzerland, "descending like dervishes on the farmhouse of a baffled family, demanding to photograph their kitchen table and their cows."

Heidi was serialised on Japanese television for a year (52 episodes), immersing an audience of largely mothers and daughters in mountain life amid goats and snowfields. It was an exhausting, monumental production, but Takahata had the stamina to direct two year-long TV successors. *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother* (1976) shows the life of a little boy in the Italian port of Genoa; then he sets out on an odyssey to Argentina, where his mother has gone to work. *Anne of Green Gables* (1979) vividly depicts the red-haired title girl, whose

high spirits would be a template for Miyazaki's Ghibli heroines and Takahata's tragic Kaguya.

A SLAPSTICK INTERLUDE

These three serials amount to around 60 hours of animation, far more than all Takahata's films combined. After finishing *Anne*, Takahata was propelled onto a far brasher, more comedic title, *Chie the Brat*. Unlike most of his past works, it was set in Japan, depicting the rough-spoken blue-collar residents of downtown Osaka, from a manga by Etsumi Haruki. It was another marathon, with Takahata directing a *Chie* feature film (with *Pom Poko*-style gags about feline testicles) and a 64-part TV series from 1981-3. *Chie* is rude, violent and disrespectful. The title girl's loutish dad is nearer Homer Simpson than the wise mountain grandpa of *Heidi*. Seeing *Chie* in Takahata's *oeuvre* is as startling as seeing Mamoru Oshii's name on the farce *Urusei Yatsura*, made around the same time.

Except that Takahata himself suggested he could have stayed with comedy. In a documentary included on the *Only Yesterday* DVD, he said, "My so-called signature titles, like *Only Yesterday* and *Grave...* They aren't my desired genre that I wanted to work on. When comparing myself with other creators, I had a genre that I thought I was good at. I like making people laugh. But when Miyazaki comes up with



fun titles, I'd want something different... No point in making imitations. So it may be fair to say that I had to make my works with a different approach."

FIREFLIES, TANUKI, YAMADAS

It may also be fair to say Takahata's different approach makes his later films challenging for many viewers. *Fireflies*, of course, is difficult for its subject matter, but Takahata's subsequent films are increasingly exploratory and experimental. 1991's *Only Yesterday*, about a young woman's journey into the Japanese country, wraps two different films around each other. One strand is about the woman's childhood memories and personal identity; the other puts her adult self in a didactic, even propagandistic, quasi-documentary about organic farms and national identity. The remembered 1960s scenes feel light, with boisterous children in airy white spaces. The 1980s framing scenes are realistic down to their characters' face muscles.

1994's *Pom Poko* opens with a masterful visual joke. The film's first scenes show exquisitely naturalistic animation of the wild *tanuki* canines, before they rush upon each other in

battle and morph into *kawaii* furry humanoids. Soon they unite to try to stop humans destroying their home. But any expectation of a Miyazaki-style eco-fantasy is derailed, as the film refuses to let individual characters drive the action, or give us a clear plot thread to hold onto. It's a messy, disorganised film about a messy, disorganised movement (compare Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue*, a film about madness that goes mad). Rather than *Mononoke*, *Pom Poko* approaches Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a "beast fable" of political activism going wrong. In a final, gorgeous miracle, the tanuki roll back time, resurrecting trees and dissolving buildings. It could be mistaken for a victory, but it's the equivalent of *Grave's* lakeside requiem, the tanukis' last farewell to what's irretrievably lost.

The white spaces of *Only Yesterday's* child scenes anticipated *My Neighbours the Yamadas* and *Princess Kaguya*. Based on a four-panel newspaper strip, *Yamadas* (1999) is a series of Peanuts-style skits about an extended Japanese family, drawn as soft shapes and sketched lines (the dog and granny are best). Like *Pom Poko*, the film ignores conventional momentum or narrative. Even its visual fireworks, as when Mr and Mrs >>>

1. Pastoral scenes in *Heidi*, the anime that brought the rolling green vistas of Europe into Japanese homes.

2. *Pom Poko* shared the pro-environmental themes of the later *Princess Mononoke*, albeit to chaotic effect. 3. Following on from *Heidi* was *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother*, also with a European setting

BOX OFFICE GOLD

Only Yesterday was a surprise hit in Japan and became the highest grossing Japanese movie of 1991. When it was released in an English language version in 2016, it earned over half a million dollars and featured *Star Wars'* Daisy Ridley in the voice cast.





© Etsumi Haruki/Futabashi · TMS

1. Chie the Brat, one of Takahata's more unusual works.
2. The Tale of the Princess Kaguya.
3. My Neighbours the Yamadas.

TAKAHATA ON MIYAZAKI

According to a Japanese friend of the writer of this article, who once met Takahata at a public event, Takahata criticised the end of Miyazaki's *Kiki's Delivery Service*. In that film's climax, Kiki regains her flying powers just in the nick of time, because, Takahata argued, *the audience wanted it to happen*. Takahata disapproved of such a crowd-pleasing ending, though he could forgive it in his friend's film. We dread to think what Takahata would have thought of *Your Name*...

>>> Yamadas' wedding turns into a gorgeous fantasy adventure, feel carelessly placed, rather than sops to a restless mainstream viewer. The experimentalism of *Pom Poko* and *Yamadas* must be accepted on its "un-anime" terms, or not at all; in that way, they're like *Belladonna* or *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*.

Released nearly 15 years after *Yamadas*, 2013's *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is Takahata's most accessible Ghibli film. It has only one "difficulty" – a marathon run-time (137 minutes) that requires viewers to be sitting very comfortably when it begins. It's the story of a heaven-sent princess who longs to be free in the country but is instead snarled up in Japan's 11th-century aristocracy. Based on a millennium-old Japanese folktale (*The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*), *Kaguya* also has shades of Takahata's *Heidi* and even of multiple restless princesses in Disney films. The picture-book style feels closer to *Only Yesterday* than *Yamadas*, though *Kaguya* was far more elaborate. Takahata obsessed over how to animate incomplete drawings and rough, unkempt, strong lines; for a full account, see the documentary *Isao Takahata and His Tale of the*

Princess Kaguya (released as a separate DVD). His film has impressionistic *coups*, such as a fleeing Kaguya dissolving into scribbles of movement; yet some of the exquisite human acting could be classic Disney.

The film played hell with Ghibli's production system, with the studio banishing *Kaguya* to a separate building. It was as if Ghibli was confirming the final separation of Takahata from Miyazaki, who was making *The Wind Rises* at the same time. And yet there were artistic exchanges between the old colleagues to the end. *Kaguya's* were relatively superficial; Takahata's film has a Miyazaki-esque fantasy flight scene and a score by Joe Hisaishi. *Wind Rises*, though, could almost be a Takahata film. Abandoning his crowd-pleasing heroines, Miyazaki finally depicted a protagonist – a myopically driven aircraft designer – with Takahata's objectivity.

Takahata's passing this March ends that shared history. But it's also the end of an individual odyssey through art and animation in which Takahata was never a follower, always his own leader. ●

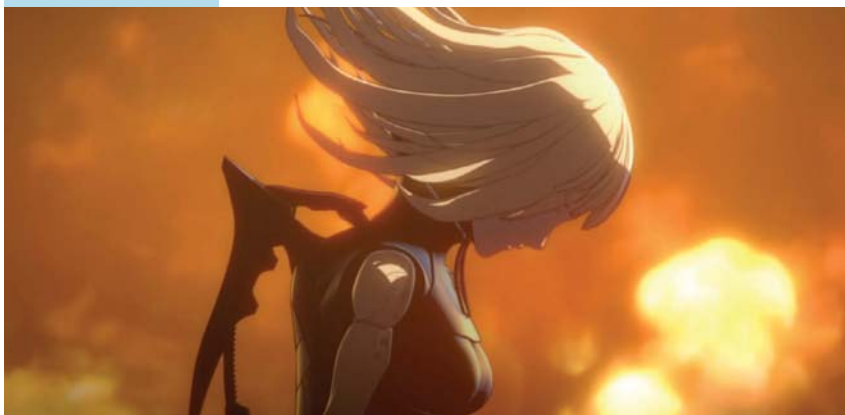


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[ANIME REVIEW]

BLAME! Bore!

28 MAY // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 12 // SCI-FI, ACTION // £24.99 (BLU-RAY), £19.99 (DVD) // 105 MINS

PLOT The A.I. that humans created centuries ago went homicidal. Now the last humans are on the edge of starvation, hiding in the margins of a vast computer-controlled city. But then a girl called Zuru encounters a stranger who might change that...

Blame! is horribly dreary. Its CG visuals have the near-monochrome dullness that afflicts other work by its studio, Polygon (*Sidonia*, *Ajin*). It's like looking at lead for a hundred minutes; even worse are *Blame!*'s hopelessly uninteresting characters. In a *Terminator*-ish future, humans cower from killer A.I.s in a massive city. Then their possible saviour arrives,



a mysterious stone-faced traveller like the Men With No Names who wander the Wild West and samurai Japan. Unfortunately, this man does have a name, Killy, which makes you wish it was still acceptable to change anime names in translation.

It's a humourless, sluggish film, with no sign of how this disaster has affected human culture and outlook. The characters are extras in their own story. A character "twist" is so heavily telegraphed that the film seems aimed at viewers who've never seen sci-fi. The robot menaces are identical crawling mannequins, as scary as game sprites. A couple of doll-like mechanical women appear later, who have slightly more uncanny screen presences, like the stony females in last year's CG *Land of the Lustrous*... but that was way more interesting than this yawner.

Woefully dull on every level. ●

☆☆☆☆

WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

DETAILS

English and Japanese soundtracks. The film is based on a manga by Tsutomu Nihei, available in English from Vertical, and the film script was adapted by Sadayuki Murai, who scripted *Perfect Blue*.



DETAILS

English and Japanese soundtracks. A two-part live-action film version of *Assassination Classroom* was released in Japan in 2015-6. Korosensei was created in CG, naturally, while Nagisa was played by singer Ryosuke Yamada, who went on to play Edward Elric in the live-action *Fullmetal Alchemist*.



[ANIME REVIEW]

ASSASSINATION CLASSROOM SEASON 2 PART 2

OUT NOW // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // SCHOOL, ACTION, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £59.99 (COLLECTORS BLU-RAY), £29.99 (DVD) // 275 MINS // 12 EPS

PLOT Class 3-E's students have achieved so much since coming under the tentacles and tutelage of Korosensei. But now, it's the final countdown to the end of the world. At last, the kids will learn who Korosensei really is, and decide – can they kill the teacher they've come to love?

At one point in this final volume, the ever-frantic Korosensei realises he didn't celebrate Christmas and New Year with his faithful students, and rushes them through both ceremonies together. These final episodes are equally a sprint to cover all bases. Korosensei's backstory is told at last; it's the tale of a



charming, redemptive relationship that'll clearly end all too soon, paralleling Korosensei's bond with Class 3E.

Korosensei's backstory ties in with the shock identity of one of the kids, leading to the first of several new battles. But it's not all fighting. The class has grown up, learning to reconcile with each other. Lead boy Nagisa becomes embroiled in romance and bromance (though he's far better at the latter). Yet the kids know their time with Korosensei is nearly over, though they're tantalised by the hope that they could pull off one more miracle... It's less fun than the first season, and the momentum's uneven, but the final send-off for the characters is as good as you could reasonably expect. If you complain that it milks the tears too far, then you never believed in Korosensei's marshmallow-soft heart.

A teary, good end to this ode to education. ●

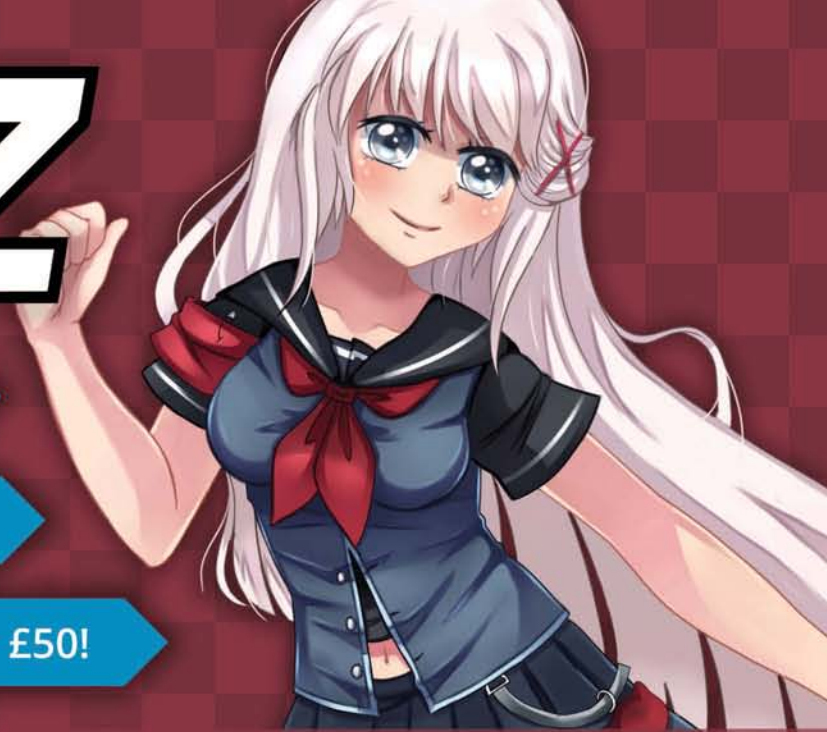
☆☆☆☆

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WIN DVD COPIES OF GOOK

OUT NOW FROM Kaleidoscope Entertainment is the Sundance Audience Award winner *Gook*, written, directed by, and starring Justin Chon (from the *Twilight* series), with Simone Baker (*American Horror Story: Roanoke*), Curtiss Cook Jr. (*The Breaks*) and comedian and YouTube star David So. This issue, we have five copies on DVD to give away to our readers!

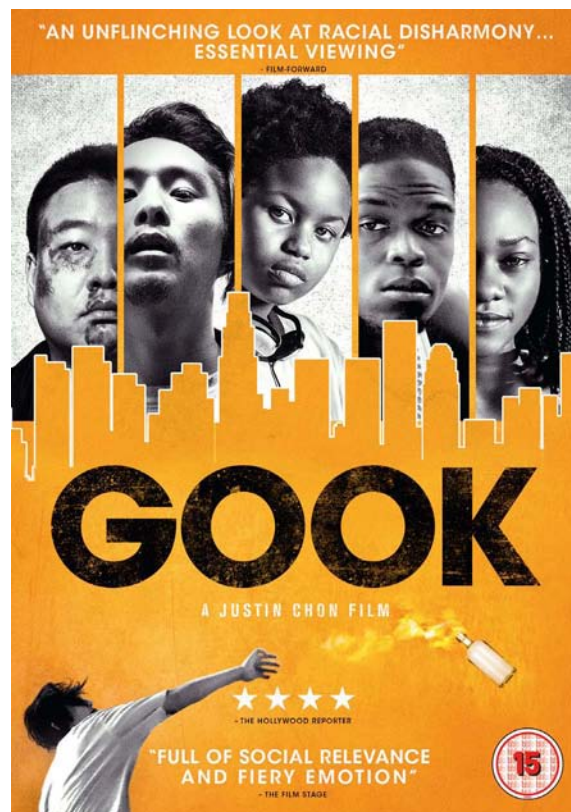
The story takes place in April 1992, in Los Angeles. Eli and Daniel, two Korean-American brothers, are struggling to keep the family business afloat after the death of their father. Their only light in the darkness is Kamilla, an 11-year-old black girl who acts as the store's unofficial third employee. However, their day-to-day struggles are thrown into perspective when the Rodney King verdict is read out and riots grip the city. The trio are plunged into a series of events that will test the true meaning of family as they defend the store while city-wide tensions escalate out of control.

If you want to win one of our five DVD copies of *Gook*, all you have to do is answer the following question correctly to be entered into our prize draw.

WHO DIRECTED GOOK?

- A) JUSTIN CHON
- B) SIMONE BAKER
- C) DAVID SO

You can enter by emailing your answer along with your name and address to neomagcomp@gmail.com, with the subject header NEO 176 *Gook* competition. Alternatively, you can enter by sending the correct answer on the back of a postcard, along with your address, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 084. Closing date: 21 June



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!

DRONE

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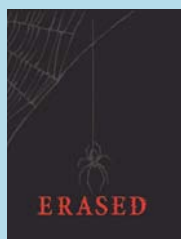
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[ANIME REVIEW]

ERASED PART 2

Back to the Past...

OUT NOW // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // TIME-TRAVEL, MYSTERY //
 £29.99 (DVD) £39.99 (COLLECTOR'S EDITION BLU-RAY/DVD) //
 130 MINS // 6 EPISODES

PLOT All seems lost for the time-traveller Satoru, who failed to change the tragedies of his childhood. Miraculously, he's given a last chance to go back in time and save his classmates and mother. But what if he trusts the wrong person?

DETAILS

English and Japanese tracks. Both editions have audio commentaries on four episodes, while the Limited Edition has special packaging and a 40-page booklet. The pivotal character of Sachiko is voiced in Japanese by Minami Takayama, famed for voicing a certain little witch in *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

At last! It's been most of a year since the release of the first half of this time-travel thriller (reviewed in NEO 167). If you've not seen the earlier episodes since then, it may be advisable to rewatch at least some of them, as there's no time for a recap. The second volume switches track in the opening seconds, plunging our hero Satoru once more back in time.

Again he finds himself in his childhood, in that fateful Hokkaido winter, with a last chance to change history. Luckily not all his actions from the previous episodes were wiped. Satoru is already friends with the red-coated girl Kayo, and she readily consents when Satoru asks her permission to "abduct" her, to keep this Riding Hood safe. But for all the boy's foreknowledge, the killer in the snow is still in shadow...

Given this belated release, it's fitting that several of the

characters must wait through time very painfully, motivated either by pure love, or else for horribly twisted reasons which may still amount to a kind of love. It bears out a weird-sounding remark made by a character who's the show's prime suspect, who says that good acts and evil deeds have the same essence.

These episodes bring thematic richness to the continually twisty story and killer cliffhangers. As Satoru turns back into a child, emotionally as well as physically, the subject of parenthood comes to the fore. The boy's mother Sachiko – who we saw murdered back in the opening episode when she realised the killer's identity – now emerges as the true hero of the series, maternal kindness incarnate. Even Kayo's monster mother, the show's weakest character, gets an interestingly open-ended send-off, to leave us wondering if we can pity such a wretch.

By the middle of the volume, most viewers will be a step ahead of Satoru and yelling at the screen. But there's a reason *why* Satoru can't see what's in front of him. A terrifying scene has our hero – who, remember, is just a little boy – realise he's in a very bad place; it's scarier than most live-action psycho-thrillers.

Some viewers may be thrown out by a scene that involves several characters carrying out a preposterous stunt which would be surely lethal in reality. It's the kind of Hollywood-style logic that some anime creators hate – see our Takahata article this issue. But it's still darn *satisfying*, as is the story's end – make sure you watch all through the credits!

Absolutely worth the wait, consolidating a terrific story. ●





[ANIME REVIEW]



FLIP FLAPPERS

Flip Flap Flop

04 JUNE // MVM // TBC // COMEDY, SCI-FI // £79.99 (DVD/BLU-RAY COLLECTOR'S EDITION) // 325 MINS // 13 EPISODES

PLOT Cocona is a normal middle-school girl who doesn't know what she wants in life, but when strange girl Papika invites her to join organisation FlipFlap, she soon finds a new goal to pursue. Cocona now helps Papika as they travel through an alternate dimension, Pure Illusion, to find crystal shards.

In its pursuit of the unusual, *Flip Flappers* suffers from a lack of an engaging narrative. Undermining Cocona's personal story to focus on the more outlandish nature of the Pure Illusion and FlipFlap might seem like fun, but leads to an ultimately unsatisfying experience.

While *Flip Flappers* is a gorgeous anime, its distinct art

style feels like a hurdle that it never quite gets over when it comes to telling the story. Emotional beats lack impact partially due to the lack of expression in the character's facial designs.

The action scenes are grand and bombastic, but overall, it's easy to be disappointed in how much effort has gone into the visuals and battles over polishing the narrative. There's a notable disconnect between the writing and animation, and it's difficult to shake off.

Flip Flappers is something akin to the offspring of *Kill la Kill* and *Madoka Magica*, but it despite its unique animation style, it fails to stand out in the crowd. It may be beautiful and have a decent soundtrack – the ending theme is intentionally deceiving as to the show's tone – but its attempt to juggle too much at once is its downfall.

It looks amazing, but the story is sorely lacking. ●

★★★★★

OVERSEAS APPRECIATION

Flip Flappers performed very poorly when the DVD and Blu-rays were released in Japan, but it has received more positive attention in the west.

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



SWORD ART ONLINE: ORDINAL SCALE

28 MAY // ANIME LIMITED // 12 // ACTION, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £17.99 (DVD), £19.99 (BLU-RAY), £34.99 (COLLECTOR'S EDITION) // 120 MINS

FullDive VR is losing popularity next to the new AR program, *Augma*, where there's no fear of death (plus, it can be played in public), but Kirito and friends find themselves in the middle of a new battle where their time in *Sword Art Online* comes back to haunt them.

As always, the SAO squad doesn't have it easy, but they move forward with flashy action against towering and threatening foes, and there's a lot of satisfying character development, emotional moments, and good humour. The antagonist's motives are understandable, but their way of achieving them is truly quite evil. The stakes feel real and there's genuine terror and suspense as the heroes fight and uphill battle.

Augma is a nice change from *FullDive VR*, and it's realised in a unique, fascinating way. *Ordinal Scale* features an engaging original story from series author Reki Kawahara. It's a fantastic addition to the growing universe of the franchise. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



ANTIPORNO

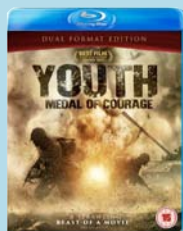
OUT NOW // THIRD WINDOW FILMS // 18 // DRAMA // £19.99 (DUAL FORMAT) // 75 MINS

Sion Sono's attempt to subvert the salacious Roman Porno genre, a staple of Nikkatsu studios in the 1970s, stars Ami Tomite as Kyoko, an artist and writer who abuses her meek assistant Noriko (Mariko Tsutsui). Or is Kyoko a character in a film within the film? It's not clear.

The script addresses how Japanese society limits women to the roles of whore or virgin, but it's awfully hard to treat this as a serious critique of patriarchy with a parade of naked female bodies and two women who alternate screaming insults at each other. The production design and photography are striking, but they're outweighed by the shrieking and misogyny.

Rather than reinventing the Roman Porno film, *Antiporno* offers more objectification. ●

★★★★★



[FILM REVIEW]

YOUTH: MEDAL OF COURAGE

Growing up is hard to do

OUT NOW // CINE ASIA // 15 // DRAMA // £15.99 (DUAL FORMAT)
// 129 MINS

PLOT Escaping abuse at home, He Xiaoping (Miao Miao) hopes to start a new life by joining a dance troupe in the People's Liberation Army, but instead is bullied by her comrades. Only Liu Feng (Huang Xuan) shows her any kindness, but his heart belongs to the beautiful Dingding (Yang Caiyu).

UK distributors Cine Asia seem to be pitching Feng Xiaogang's latest film as a wartime blockbuster, adding the *Medal Of Courage* suffix to the title and using a dramatic shot of soldiers under fire on the cover, but those are rather misleading. There is a very impressive battle scene in the middle of the movie, most of which unfolds in a dazzling long continuous take, however, the heart of the film is a melodrama.

The backdrop to the story is the changing socio-political landscape of China beginning in the 1970s, with the death of Mao, the violence of the Sino-Vietnamese war, and the rapid transformation of the economy in the 1990s. The strongest section is the first half when Xiaoping, all fresh-faced exuberance and enthusiasm, joins the dance troupe, only to find that everyone turns their noses up at someone they consider a country bumpkin.

The film is shot in gorgeous warm hues and flattering soft

light that only accentuates the fact that Feng's vision of the past is inhabited entirely by very attractive people. As much as Dingding is the girl everyone has a crush on, there's no one in the troupe less than picture perfect.

Many of the key players are newcomers to the screen including Miao Miao as the luckless Xiaoping and Elane Zhong as lead dancer Suizi, both of whom are very good. The performance sequences may all consist of Communist Party-approved odes to the revolutionary struggle, but the dancing itself is superbly performed and staged.

What's lacking is any real sense of critique. Feng is happy to show that beneath the greasepaint and smiles, there is discord in Mao's socialist paradise, and one key scene has Liu Feng being interrogated for making a pass at a female comrade, but there's none of the biting commentary of Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* or Zhang Yimou's *To Live*.

The script, by Yan Geling, makes reference to the re-education camps where the unlucky had their spirits broken, but none of that appears in the film. Instead, *Youth* celebrates the idealistic zeal of China under communism, contrasting that with the corruption and materialism that followed the introduction of capitalism.

No doubt the Communist Party censors of the 1970s would have decried *Youth* as bourgeois for its romantic melodrama, and Feng is guilty of sentimentalising the past, but the cast of fresh faces are great and it all looks sumptuous. ●

★★★★★

TRIVIA

The script for *Youth* was inspired by the personal experiences of screenwriter Yan Geling who, as a child, was a dancer assigned to entertain the People's Liberation Army.



DIY

Amateur coders will love the Garage section of the software, which allows you to program your own Toy-Con by combining input-output commands – a surprisingly deep feature that encourages creative thinking!

[GAME REVIEW]

NINTENDO LABO: VARIETY KIT Lab Fab

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER: NINTENDO // DEVELOPER: NINTENDO 3 EPD // INTERACTIVE MODEL KIT // £59.99 (SWITCH)

Nintendo have always been known as innovators, but their latest release is surely one of their most unusual products yet. Harkening back to the company's roots as a toy maker, each *Labo Variety Kit* comes with a set of pre-perforated cardboard sheets that can be popped out, folded together and fused with the Switch's Joy-Con controllers to create one of five 'Toy-Con' inventions.

From the quick and simple RC car that uses controller vibrations to shuffle along flat surfaces to the much more complex piano that makes clever use of the IR camera, each Toy-Con is great fun to build, thanks in no small part to the

interactive and amusingly written instructions displayed on the Switch's screen.

After completion, your creations can be used as peripherals to interact with a variety of minigames, such as a simple fishing sim and a racing game with its own track editor, but most of this software is pretty barebones and not something you'll likely stick with for long. The main draw really does come with building the Toy-Con and discovering how they work, and if you've got young children interested in arts and crafts, doing so is a great way to fill many a rainy afternoon.

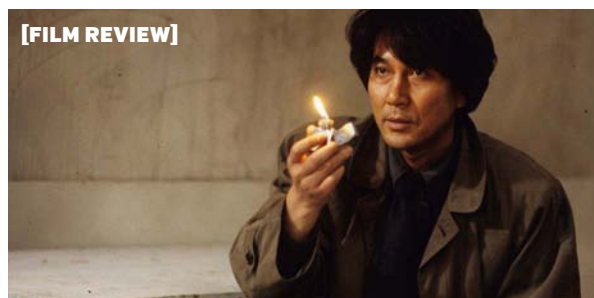
Despite the accompanying software offering minimal replay value, the building aspect of *Nintendo Labo* more than makes up for it. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



[FILM REVIEW]



CURE X marks the spot

03 JULY // EUREKA! // THRILLER // 15 // £17.99 (DUAL FORMAT) // 111 MINS

PLOT Investigating a series of murders where all the victims are marked with an 'X' on their necks and the perpetrators had no motive, detective Takabe (Koji Yakusho) suspects the deaths are linked to the manipulative Mamiya (Masato Hagiwara).

Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure* is just over 20 years old now, but it has lost none of its unsettling power. The director never indulges in cheap scares or jump moments, preferring to slowly, inexorably crank up the tension, just as the pressure piles up on Takabe. In addition to the stress of the investigation and the very uncooperative Mamiya, who infuriatingly answers every

question with one of his own, Takabe's home life is falling apart as his wife suffers from a debilitating mental illness. Everyone who crosses paths with Mamiya seems to fall under his spell sooner or later, which casts a dark shadow over Takabe as he tries to cling to his own sanity. The movie is shot with naturalistic lighting and muted colours that suggest a world slowly being drained of all vitality, a sense reinforced by the crumbling buildings and decaying interiors that Takabe navigates. The director's dispassionate handling of the violence somehow makes the crimes even more disturbing.

Masato Hagiwara turns in a thoroughly creepy performance as the smug Mamiya, while Yakusho seethes with frustration. *Cure* is a particularly effective exercise in slow dread and the power of suggestion. ●

★★★★★

KEY TALENT

Koji Yakusho reunited with director Kurosawa for another thriller, *Pulse*, and his brilliant family drama *Tokyo Sonata*. Catch him in Hirokazu Kore'eda's *The Third Murder* in July from Arrow Academy.



[ANIME REVIEW]

BLUE EXORCIST KYOTO SAGA VOLUME 2

Raging Rin

28 MAY // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 12 // FANTASY, ACTION //
£19.99 (DVD), £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 130 MINS // 6 EPISODES

PLOT So far, the schemes of the wily traitor exorcist Todo have worked perfectly. The Impure King has been resurrected, and will unleash poison death on the city of Kyoto. With Rin locked up, can his conflicted classmates rally round him?

The second half of *Blue Exorcist*'s cohesive *Kyoto Saga* plotline could be subtitled *All The Fighting*. Following a volume's worth of set-up, albeit set-up with a very good story, Rin's still-dealing-with-issues gang takes to the hills for serious scrapping, pitted against the punchably suave turncoat Todo and the blobby mass of the Impure King.

"What a lovely fireworks display," purrs the stripy-hatted Mephisto, who does little but enjoy the action as indulgently as if he's watching a cat video. He's not wrong. The battles are full of fire, lightning, and an impressive range of magic creatures. There are angels, water nymphs and everyone's favourite giant kitty, batting at the blob monster with demonic feline fury. Heck, this is a cat video.

But the show also takes pains to give each of the principals substantial "moments" and move their development along. As you'd expect from the first volume, Ryuji and Rin's twitchy-glasses brother Yukio gets most attention – and believe us, Yukio's *really* neurotic now. But

there's also a lovely arc for Shiemi, dismissed by multiple characters as the team's useless baggage. At first, she looks like a supportive prop, to stop Rin toppling off his hero's path. But by the end, without any implausible makeover, she looks like she could be Rin's equal, if only she could believe it.

The extended battle has slack patches and clumsy interweaving, the kind that suddenly whips us back to a fight we'd forgotten from 20 minutes ago. But it's still massively enjoyable, the spectacle interspersed with slower scenes which let characters blow off steam entertainingly and touchingly. Lots of plot points are left open, teasing more *Exorcist* anime to come. That's not confirmed yet, but heaven knows there's enough material in the still-ongoing manga. A-1 Pictures may be following the *Attack on Titan* anime model, gambling that fans will wait if the results are good enough.

It's only weeks since *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* was released, a far campier, madder take on the *shonen* hero epic, which seemed deranged in ways only anime could be. In comparison *Kyoto Saga* feels part of the same mainstream universe as *Harry Potter* and *The Avengers*, and some self-identifying otaku is probably arguing that its carefully-calibrated story and characters are Fake *Shonen* Anime next to *Jojo's Peak Shonen* Madness. But it would be nice to think – as *Kyoto Saga*'s last episode suggests rather sweetly – that such fundamentally different types *can* live together.

Splendid shonen action, which makes all the set-up on the first volume worth it. ●



DETAILS

English and Japanese tracks. Rated '12' by the BBFC despite (in its words) moderate fantasy violence, threat, injury details and sex references (that'll be Shura then). The *Kyoto Saga* storyline takes the anime up to volume nine of the manga; 12 further manga volumes have been published as of writing.

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FROM SOFTWARE

BANDAI
NAMCO
Entertainment



POKÉMON MOVIE COLLECTION: DIAMOND & PEARL

OUT NOW // MANGA // PG // COMEDY, SCI-FI, FANTASY // £19.99 (DVD) // 374 MINS // 4 MOVIES

PLOT This collection of movies follows Ash, Brock and Dawn as they go on adventures based on the games of the same name. The collection includes *The Rise of Darkrai*, *Giratina and the Sky Warrior*, *Arceus and the Jewel of Life*, and *Zoroark - Master of Illusions*.

Ash wants to be the very best and these movies pit him against four incredibly rare Pokémon, bringing fans what the show has always excelled at – exciting battles with Ash and Pikachu, and channeling their sense of child-like wonder as they innocently and bravely do their best.

Your favourite movie will likely depend on your favourite Pokémon – we



know you have one – and whilst none of them are quite as good as the original *Pokémon* trilogy, or the more recent *I Choose You!*, there's very little to fault here as they are each enjoyable movies. Nostalgic fans may mourn the lack of Misty when Brock is prominent, but Dawn does a great job in filling in her boots.

It's a shame that they are exclusively being released on DVD with no option for Blu-ray, but the animation, character and Pokémon designs, English dub and catchy soundtracks shine as brightly as ever. Being SD doesn't stop them from tugging at your heartstrings!

If you're a *Pokémon* fan then this collection is a no-brainer. Four movies for little more than the price of one, you get to watch Ash and Pikachu fight, and befriend, some of the fiercest and most-revered Pokémon to date. ●

★★★★☆

© Fujita



WOTAKOI: LOVE IS HARD FOR OTAKU VOLUME 1

OUT NOW // KODANSHA // 16+ // COMEDY // £10.99 // AUTHOR: FUJITA

Welcome to the world of the stealth otaku, in this two-volume bumper edition of *Wotakoi: Love is Hard For Otaku* by Fujita. Narumi Momose might look like a polished professional working woman, but she harbours a dark and terrible secret... she's an otaku! And she'll go to any lengths to hide that fact from her co-workers, since the last time she got outed her lost her boyfriend, who, in her words, "couldn't stomach dating a fujoshi." So when she bumps into an old friend at her new job and he asks her if she's heading to the next Comiket, she almost dies right on the spot. When she swears him to secrecy, his counter-proposal stops her in her tracks – if it's a boyfriend she's after, why don't they just date each other?

A fun, light hearted romance comedy that's sure to resonate with some readers! ●

★★★★☆



© Hitomi Takano

MY BOY VOLUME 1

OUT NOW // VERTICAL // DRAMA // £10.99 // AUTHOR: HITOMI TAKANO

My Boy is the sort of slice of life, compassionate and intimate tale that manga does so well – a portrait of two people with internal struggles who meet at a serendipitous time in their lives, and together help each other through. When it comes to the protagonists though, there's a slight twist: one is a 30-year-old office drone, and the other is a 12-year-old boy. Satoko sees Mashuu alone in a park at night practicing for the football team, and is moved to help him out. Her altruistic spirit soon leads her to becoming more and more involved in his life, and as she does so, she begins to realise he may be being neglected by his cold, aloof father, and that his mother is completely absent. But having someone to focus on takes her mind away from her own broken heart.

A beautifully told story about love, kindness, and loss. ●

★★★★☆

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BATMAN NINJA

The Dark Knight has been thrown back in time by one of his arch nemeses and finds himself in feudal Japan! This crossover of one of America's most iconic superheroes with one of Japan's most iconic cultural exports has created a movie that truly has to be seen to be believed. We spoke with director Jumpei Mizusaki, screenwriter Kazuki Nakashima, and character designer Takashi Okazaki to discover how they brought the concept to life.

What did you think of the initial concept of 'Batman Ninja'?

Mizusaki: I considered about it very seriously. In Japan, the concept is often viewed like a joke and that is very surprising to me.

Nakashima: First off, I thought "That is interesting!". I was so excited that I wrote a very first rough plot within about an hour after I received the offer.

Okazaki: It's absolutely the best concept without a doubt, isn't it! When I first heard about this project, I thought "I'm definitely going to do this!" and sketched a concept art straight away!

What is the general story of the movie?

Nakashima: It starts from Batman, the Joker and the Gotham villains accidentally being sent back to feudal time in Japan from the Gotham city of current time. For some reason, Batman arrives to that time period two years later than the villains, and finds out that Japan is nearly taken over by the villains who are trying to rewrite the history of the whole world. Batman has to fight those villains without modern technologies, in order to take the villains back to the modern time to set the history right.

This has been billed by some as very much a 'back to basics' Batman – what

was it in particular that interests you about this new challenge for the Dark Knight?

Mizusaki: There were many *Batman* remakes which had a very serious tone so I thought by now we should try bringing back humour to *Batman*. Thanks to DC and Warner accepting that idea, we could bring in humorous elements without hesitation and it was a lot of fun.

Nakashima: He didn't go "back to basics" (LOL). But after *The Dark Knight*, I thought Batman has been too serious (although that is certainly what's attractive about him) so I wanted to depict Batman as the "Comic Hero".

Okazaki: One of my childhood dreams was to "draw Batman" as a job, and the dream came true! That was more than enough to make me feel motivated.

Mr Nakashima, what was your favourite villain to write for?

Nakashima: Definitely the Joker. I wanted to depict the Joker as the frantic prankster. I especially enjoyed the story in the latter part of the film.

And your favourite ally?

Nakashima: I was relieved to see that people were excited about having four Robins appear in the film. Actually I was hoping to write more about the



1. Batman Ninja answers the question: "how many Robins can you fit into one movie?". The answer is four. 2. The Joker: made for anime? It's actually quite possible. 3. Character designer Takashi Okazaki had a field day with Batman's costume. 4. Expect plenty of iconic enemies!

"THE LIGHT ATMOSPHERE OF ADAM WEST'S *BATMAN* TV SERIES WAS EXACTLY WHAT WE USED AS THE STANDARD IN JUDGING WHAT'S OKAY AND WHAT'S TOO MUCH. THE HEAVY ATMOSPHERE OF THE *DARK KNIGHT* SERIES WAS ALSO SOMETHING WE WANTED TO DIFFERENTIATE FROM, SO WE BROUGHT IN LOTS OF HUMOUR WITHOUT ANY HESITATION." DIRECTOR JUMPEI MIZUSAKI

background of the four of them, although I had to give up on it due to the limitation of run time.

Mr Okazaki, how was the design of Batman's costume developed?

Okazaki: We were given a lot of freedom in terms of design and creating this project, so I could have made the designs crazier, but what I did was set my own rules to enable audiences around the world to recognise them as the same original characters. It was a lot of fun to imagine about each character being sent to feudal Japan, what kind of outfit or armour they would wear and what weapon they would use.

What was the biggest challenge in designing characters for *Batman Ninja*?

Okazaki: The part where I had to balance between keeping the characteristics of the usual characters everyone's familiar with while also being aggressive (adding originality to the characters) was the most difficult part and also where I enjoyed the most.

How does stripping Batman of his technology change his character?

Mizusaki: Among many works in the DC universe, this film presents the fact

that Batman "has nothing" as he says so in the film. One of the highlights of the film is that by losing the gadgets, he changes his style from protecting himself from the enemies to become more proactive and step out by himself.

Nakashima: I think it is more like understanding his true quality, rather than changing.

Okazaki: This is an important part of the story, and also one of the highlights of this film. I hope everyone who watches this can pay attention to how Batman fights after losing his gadgets and how he gains strength.

How well does the character of Batman lend itself to the backdrop of feudal Japan?

Mizusaki: Because Batman is used to dealing with unusually unique villains, he can accept anything that happens to him, so even when he is sent to the past, he takes the role of calming down the audience, which was what allowed us to create such a crazy story, so I am very grateful to Batman about it.

Nakashima: Even in the craziest environment, he corresponds in a way that's very Batman-ish. I think that's what's attractive about Batman. >>>



"WE INCLUDED EVERYTHING THAT THE AUDIENCES IN AMERICAN CULTURE AREA WANTED IN JAPANESE ANIME. I COULD SEE AT THE PREMIERE THAT THE AUDIENCE WERE LAUGHING IN THE SCENES WHICH WE EXPECTED THEM TO REACT, SO I WAS VERY GLAD THAT THE HUMOUR IN ANIME IS UNIVERSAL." DIRECTOR JUMPEI MIZUSAKI

>>> What was your previous experience of Batman?

Mizusaki: The version I first knew was the Tim Burton version. I found it very attractive that the depiction of Gotham City was very artistic. I also thought the style of Batman, taking everything seriously and corresponding calmly even against the most comical enemies, was very different from other heroes. Mr. Nakashima who did the script and Mr. Okazaki who did the character design picked up elements from the version of Batman that's closer to the original comics but I worked on this project as the generation who has known Batman from movies.

Nakashima: The TV series featuring Adam West is my first experience. I think I was five or six years old. Because it was a very pop series, I had a comical and fun impression of it, but later I became a fan of American comics and realized that he was a serious character. When I was around 30 years old, I happened to read the original comic of the *Dark Knight Returns* and I was very impressed that "American Comics can do such level of expression". And of course, I personally had fun watching all the movies that came after that as a fan.

Okazaki: Batman has always been my favourite American comic hero ever since when I was a child. When I was in middle high school, I read *Year One* which my father bought me and I was so shocked as if the world had turned upside down. The story was a bit difficult to understand for me as a child but I was completely overwhelmed by the artwork. It is one of the works that affected my philosophy towards art.

What does the animated medium add to this story that live action is unable to do? Also, specifically, what does the anime version add to telling this story that an American animation would be unable to do?

Mizusaki: We differentiated the looks of the world using animated

expressions. The usual Gotham city, Batman's perspective of the unknown world which he has newly arrived in, how he sees everything after he accepts this new world and the Joker's perspective when he fully adapts to the new world. I think such differentiation is very difficult to achieve by live action. Normally, I think when 3DCG with cell-shading is used instead of hand drawn animation in places such as US, the objective is mostly to decrease the cost or to accommodate to the lack of talents. But in the case of *Batman Ninja*, we used 3DCG with cell-shading as an aggressive approach to truly depict Mr. Okazaki's artwork and also to enhance the visuals in expressing Batman's impression towards Japan.

Nakashima: Both from the animation and from the story point of view, I believe we have accomplished something that only our team is able to do. You will understand what I mean when you see the film.

Okazaki: Regardless of animation / live action or American / Japanese, this film is full of amazements that only this film has.

What other projects have you worked on before that aided you in your role on this project?

Mizusaki: We fostered the techniques to realize the expression like comic books and the direction of changing the tone of the artwork on the opening animation of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*. Also the expression of going back and forth between 2D animation and 3DCG was also what we experimented with in the opening animation of *FREEDOM* where we mixed live action and animation. Also, our team that works on TV commercials and promotional videos using motion graphics were the ones who created the scene that introduces all the villains.

Nakashima: I guess it would be everything that I have ever written before. Not only *Batman Ninja*, but all my new works are constructed upon the



5. Some familiar faces given a Japanese twist! 6. How will Batman triumph when the odds are stacked against him?! 7. Don't let the sour face fool you, this Batman outing has plenty of old school humour! 8. Yes, that is Alfred Pennyworth, lurking in the background...



experience I have gained in the works prior to it.

Okazaki: Out of all the works that I was involved in before, the experience from *AFRO SAMURAI* helped me the most. Many people say that the way that *AFRO SAMURAI* combines different elements and interprets things is very unique and interesting. That led me to realise that those are my unique characteristics. Based on that experience, I was able to put my best into this film with those characteristics.

What is your favourite Hollywood movie starring the character? What did you think about the early TV series starring Adam West? Is there much humour in *Batman Ninja*?

Mizusaki: The light atmosphere of Adam West's *Batman* TV series was exactly what we used as the standard in judging what's okay and what's too much. The heavy atmosphere of the *Dark Knight* series was also something we wanted to differentiate from, so we brought in lots of humour without any hesitation. However, we did not make the sense of humour typical, like having some characters commenting about funny people / things. We left that to the audience so they can enjoy making comments about what's funny, so even when there's something funny happening in the film, no character will think / comment that it's funny.

Nakashima: As in the answer to the other question, my first experience with *Batman* was the version starring Adam West. I watched it right when it came out and I loved it. In Japan, plastic models of the Bat Mobile were released at a very reasonable price and I made many of them. (Because they often get broken or go missing. By the way, they were commonly called "Batman Car" in Japan). I think there is a lot of humour in our film. When we had the premiere screening at Anaheim, I was very relieved that the audiences were laughing out loud for many times.

Okazaki: *Batman Returns* by Tim Burton is my favourite *Batman* movie. I also like the TV series starring Adam West as its character design is very cute. There is a lot of humour in *Batman Ninja*, too!

How difficult is it to create a project with global appeal? Were you conscious of the demands of different audiences or did you focus on one specific audience (US or Japan?)

Mizusaki: Personally, it was relatively easier for me because I was released from the elements that are required to target Japanese anime fans. From the direction point of view, I definitely targeted audiences in the American culture areas. I wanted the audience to instantly understand that the story takes place in Japan but if we made it to take place in the modern time, it would have been difficult because the cultures in Asian countries are pretty much standardized nowadays. Somewhat in that sense, we judged that is good to bring in the unique atmosphere of feudal Japan.

The project's concept was well received in the west – did you expect this international interest?

Mizusaki: Of course! We included everything that the audiences in American culture area wanted in Japanese anime. I could see at the premiere that the audience were laughing in the scenes which we expected them to react, so I was very glad that the humour in anime is universal. I'd be more than happy if you could recognise this as the proof of friendship between Japan and the American culture area.

Batman Ninja is out now on Amazon Video, Blu-ray Steelbook, Blu-ray and DVD from Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Japan. ●



[ANIME REVIEW]

GUNDAM: THE ORIGIN I-IV

Char Aznable: The Untold Story

28 MAY // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // MECHA, SPACE-OPERA // £49.99
(COLLECTOR'S EDITION BLU-RAY) // 258 MINS // 4 EPISODES (60-70
MINS EACH)

PLOT Space is about to become humanity's new battlefield. The war was shown in the original *Gundam*; this is the story of how that war started, and how one bitter, intimidating little boy grew up to become its most terrifying fighter.

DETAILS

Japanese and English tracks; the set also contains four art cards. While the last episode in this collection ends in a fairly satisfying place, a fifth *Origin* episode was released in Japan last September, and a sixth should have come out when you read this. Anime Limited can't confirm if it will collect these later episodes in the future.

The first *Mobile Suit Gundam* series from 1979 was great for many reasons, but visuals weren't among them. Even Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, its Character Designer and Animation Director, says he's embarrassed to watch it today. In 2015, Yasuhiko became Chief Director of *Origin*, a cinema-level spectacle using flashback scenes from his mammoth *Gundam* manga. Going from crude '70s small-screen animation to *Origin* is boggling. *Origin* rubs it in at the start, with an explosive spacewar like a radiant cosmic flower garden. It could have been captioned, "We Don't Have '70s Production Values Any More, Baby!"

Yet *Origin* very much assumes you know the 1979 series (available from Anime Limited). The story plunges into complex family conflicts among humans on a space colony, aimed at fans who know their Zabis from their Rals, and that Casval, a glowering blond boy with a murdered father, will become Char, greatest warrior and strategist in the *Gundam* universe. *Origin*

shows Casval's transformation into hero and monster, set in a ten-year history leading up to the *Gundam* we know.

We start with Casval at 11 years old (this kid started early). He faces down adults twice his size, and later pulverises them in an armoured tank. We follow Casval through his exile to Earth; his new identity as Char; his military training; and his introduction to a new kind of robot battle suit. We see him heroically protect his little sister Artesia (who'll one day be called Sayla); but we're also shown his really dark side, committing acts that would make Light Yagami wet himself.

The terrific visuals recall the spectacles of Yasuhiko's 1980s movies *Arion* and *Venus Wars*. The fights are especially admirable. There's a duel with an old-style knight through a Spanish castle; a desperate lunar defection plays like a Hollywood heist. Characters who were classed as "enemies" on TV become heroic, even loveable. The breakout star is the oversized Zeon commander Dozle, a hilarious hulk you could hug.

But anyone hoping for deeper insight into Casval / Char will be disappointed. Parts of his story are shoddy – the way he gets a new identity is ridiculously contrived and convenient. It also involves him engineering an appalling crime, in the anime's most shocking moment. This could have been built upon in umpteen ways, or used as a killer ending. Instead the brutal revelation – that *Gundam*'s anti-hero superman was just a smirking mass-murdering jerk all along – is thrown away so casually that you're tempted to quit watching.

An often splendid series, but the handling of the central character has problems. ●



WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET
THIS MONTH

WE NOTED LAST month that 28 May should be frighteningly busy for anime releases, and their number has only grown. *Gundam – The Origin* (reviewed this issue) is due on Blu-ray that day. So is *Lupin The Third Part IV*, a new TV outing for the roguish thin thief, as a Limited Collectors' Blu-ray (not to be confused with the current 'Part 5' series on TV now). Also, just announced at press-time, the 2000 fanged future Western *Vampire Hunter D* will come out as a Collectors' Blu-ray / DVD combo, initially exclusive to the AllTheAnime.com store.

They join the "Ultimate" Edition Blu-ray of the lupine fantasy *Wolf's Rain*, and the live-action *Tokyo Ghoul* on Blu-ray and DVD. Plus several titles we review this issue – *Sword Art Online: Ordinal Scale*; *Fairy Tail: Dragon Cry*; the end of *Blue Exorcist: Kyoto Saga*; the film *Blame!*; and *Girlish Number*.

Moving to the next week, Manga Entertainment has the third volume of *Dragon Ball Super* for DVD and Blu-ray on 4 June along with a Deluxe Blu-ray of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. Plus, MVM has a Blu-ray / DVD of *Flip Flappers*, reviewed this issue.

A week after, on 11 June, MVM brings out a Blu-ray and DVD of the comedy *Yusibu*, whose heftier full name is *I Couldn't Become a Hero, So I Reluctantly Decided to Get a Job*. It's one of those anime comedies where "fantasy" heroes must get normal employment, this time in a retail store.

18 June sees an especially notable release from Third Window Films. Some of you will know *Belladonna of Sadness*, an adults-only film released by Osamu Tezuka's studio in the 1970s. Now Third Window is releasing *Belladonna's* two film forerunners, called *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Cleopatra*. Both films will be released in a single Blu-ray set. Like *Belladonna*, they're sexual films, not for kids, though with room for goofy comedy. *Nights* is a Sinbad-style adventure; *Cleopatra* involves the titular Egyptian queen, plus time-travel.

MVM has a more mildly sexy comedy due the same day. *Heaven's Lost Property* Season 1 has a boy fixated on girl's



1. If you ever needed to have it re-explained that not all animation is for children, it would be just before you purchase Third Window's double pack. 2. Cleopatra's favourite hobbies: shopping, seduction and time travel. 3. Third Window's double pack of decidedly adult animation is due 18 June. 4. Manga's live action version of *Tokyo Ghoul* gets a release at the end of the month.

undergarments and his winged android servant, because... why not? No such naughtiness in Season 3 of *Yu-Gi-Oh! Zexal*, released by Manga as an 8-disc DVD set. Anime Limited has a standard Blu-ray of the fourth *Persona 3* film, *Winter of Rebirth*.

And finally, for lovers of cute idol singers everywhere, Anime Limited brings out *Love Live! Sunshine* on 18 June as a Collectors Blu-ray and a DVD. Warning: high levels of *kawaii* are expected... ●



[FILM REVIEW]

PSYCHOKINESIS

From deadbeat dad to superhero

OUT NOW // NETFLIX // CERT 15 // ACTION // 102 MINS

PLOT Shim Seok-heon (Ryu Seung-ryong) is a hopeless slacker, but when he unexpectedly develops telekinetic powers, he has the chance to make amends with his estranged daughter Ru-mi (Shim Eun-kyung). She's battling the criminal gang trying to forcibly evict her from the land they want to develop into a shopping centre.

Following his brilliant take on the zombie movie with *Train To Busan*, writer and director Yeon Sang-ho takes a swing at the superhero film with *Psychokinesis*. True to his past form, he displays both a fluency in the language of the genre he's exploring, and the ability to play with the conventions of the medium.

His protagonist, Seok-heon, is hardly cut from a standard superhero cloth. Rumpled, slovenly, and selfish, his first thought when he discovers his superpowers is to become a magician in order to make some money. There are shades here of Spider-man's attempt to become a wrestler and, like the friendly neighbourhood wall-crawler, Seok-heon has to learn that with power comes responsibility, particularly where Ru-mi is concerned. He's been absent from her life for so long that when they first cross paths at her mother's funeral, he very nearly walks right past without recognising her.

A classic superhero motif is the hero soaring through the air to catch a plummeting damsel-in-distress in his arms – Richard Donner used that to great effect in 1978's *Superman* – and Yeon puts a twist on the familiar image by swapping a lovestruck romantic interest, like Lois Lane, for the hero's daughter. Seok-heon's journey is one of seeking redemption, trying to belatedly compensate for the decades he was absent from his daughter's life.

Seok-heon joins the ranks of the Korean cinematic everyman, those unlikely blue-collar figures, frequently played by Song Kang-ho, who have heroism forced upon them by circumstance. Shim Eun-kyung brings fire and tenacity to Ru-mi, who is always an active participant in events, never just there to be rescued or to be a mere bystander. She's really the backbone of the resistance to the gangsters, refusing to be cowed by intimidation or violence.

Like many recent Korean films, the movie has a strong message about class, wealth and power. The good guys are all resolutely working class, while the gangsters are led by CEO Min (Kim Min-jae), who hopes to climb the corporate ladder. Min and his squad of thugs are employed by Taesan Construction to clear out the residents of the shopping arcade where Ru-mi has her small chicken restaurant. The head of Taesan isn't some alpha male, Lex Luthor character. Instead, it's Director Hong (Jung Yu-mi), a young woman whose attractive exterior hides her utter amorality. It's Hong who most clearly articulates the message about the clash between those on the bottom rung of the social ladder versus those at the top.

IF YOU LIKE THIS

Yeon Sang-ho's *Train To Busan* is a must-see, but check out the animated prequel *Seoul Station*, and 2011's *The King Of Pigs*, a brutal look at bullying in South Korea.



Hong is able to use her contacts in the media and the police to pile pressure upon Ru-mi and those resisting the eviction, but the most telling scene on that front is when she

"SEOK-HEON JOINS THE RANKS OF THE KOREAN CINEMATIC EVERYMAN, THOSE UNLIKELY BLUE-COLLAR FIGURES, FREQUENTLY PLAYED BY SONG KANG-HO, WHO HAVE HEROISM FORCED UPON THEM"

confronts Seok-heon. "Know your place, please," she tells him bluntly. More subtle perhaps is the contrast between Ru-mi's fried chicken and the fussy finger food served at the very upmarket restaurant where Hong meets Min – obviously the sort of establishment where any review would comment on the 'plating' of the meal. *Train To Busan* had a similar message via the character of the wealthy businessman on the train who brags about his connections and demands special treatment, but it's articulated more clearly here, particularly when the police and Min's thugs join forces to assault the tenants.

Action scenes are smaller in scale than those of *Train To Busan*, but nonetheless still effectively handled, particularly when Seok-heon first figures out that he can throw people

around using his mind. Rather than having Seok-heon just arch an eyebrow or furrow his brow, Ryu Seung-ryong brings his character's powers to vivid life by giving them physical expression using his entire body. He writhes, twists and gestures as he manipulates his surroundings with his abilities.

The CG in the film is good but not great – it's not hard to spot when Seok-heon has been replaced by a computer-generated double, although fortunately the key scenes don't rely on that technique. The film is not as mechanistic or abrupt in its violence as Yeon's zombie outing, although one early scene that sets the plot in motion is startling in its suddenness.

The violence is balanced by regular dashes of humour, much of it at the expense of Min and his gangsters. Kim Min-jae's performance borders on being hammy, but he's hardly the first Korean actor to play a gangster as a loudmouth, boorish thug in an expensive suit that somehow manages to make him look cheap. There's a lovely exchange between Min and his right-hand man, played by Tae Hang-ho. When Min asks his underling if he's messed up the bookkeeping again, the gangster replies with hurt indignation that he has an advanced certificate in accounting.

Although *Psychokinesis* never reaches the delirious, nail-biting intensity of *Train To Busan*, it confirms Yeon Sang-ho's talent for inventive genre filmmaking. Displaying a lighter touch than in any of his previous works, Yeon deftly balances pathos, comedy and action with this tale of an underdog hero who finally makes good. ●

★★★★★

TRIVIA

The two leads in *Psychokinesis*, Ryu Seung-ryong and Shim Eun-kyung, previously provided the voices of a father and daughter in Yeon's animated zombie film *Seoul Station*.

NEXT ISSUE

NEO

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MANGA EXTRACT

VOID

By Darrien Kobayashi Gibson (Aki-T)

THIS ISSUE, WE have an extract from Darrien Kobayashi Gibson's *VOID*. "*VOID* is a cyberpunk inspired, future noir story about a mega city overrun with poverty in a time where technology is in constant development," he told us, of the action in the manga.

"Citizens of the city have become hooked on a new drug called VOID, which takes the user out of reality through technology. An underground developer called SHERBERT has been updating it and experimenting on people from across the city, causing meltdown and chaos. VOID users wish for more just like any addict wanting to escape from the reality they live in, and as you will see throughout the story, the developers start experimenting with some crazy stuff! Jack's mission is to track down SHERBERT and try and clean the streets."

Of the action in the next few pages, he told us "we meet our main character Jack as he is patrolling the streets following a tip off on a VOID deal going down in a dingy bar. Jack, being a detective, decides to go and ask some questions and things get a little messy. It's short and sweet but following up his interrogation we find out this simple tip-off could lead to something bigger."

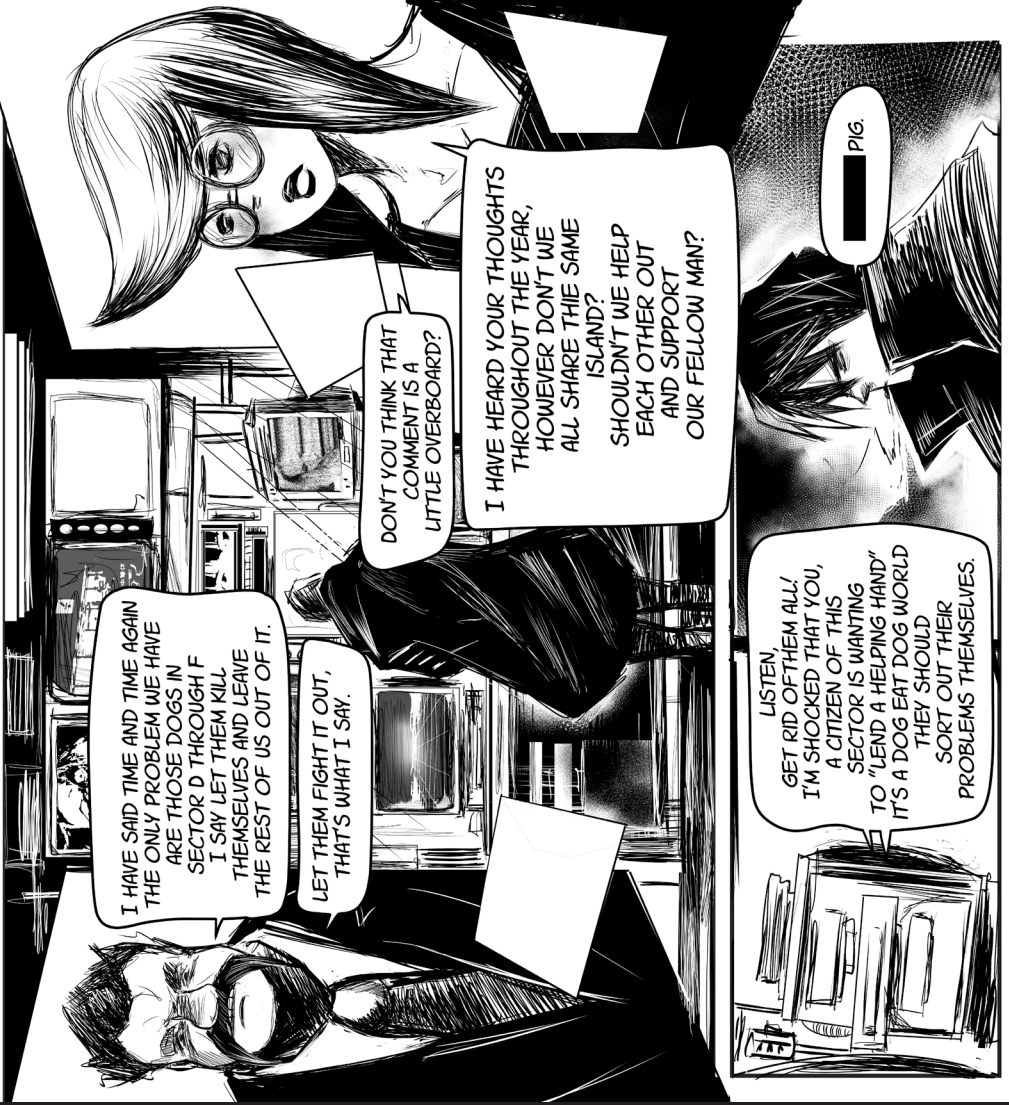
Darrien has an interesting perspective on the manga industry, as he moved from Cornwall to Japan, where he lives currently. "When I was living back in Cornwall, manga was pretty hard to come by, I would have to order at my local book store to get issues of *Bleach*, and *NEO* was my bible growing up. Compared to Japan, it's pretty different! Manga is such a huge thing here in Japan; you can go to most stores and you will find manga. At first I was excited to see in the flesh what it was like, and then it became depressing. There is so much manga here it's really true when Japanese people say it is pretty much impossible to break into the market. You would see floors of issue ones and it made me feel pretty low. Since I have moved to Japan I have realized that life as a manga artist isn't as easy as *Bakuman* makes it seem! That being said, I won't let that stop me from trying. I have spoken to several pros over here and when I asked for advice they would say 'make it interesting and make it new'. It is something that I'm always trying to do, I'm trying to take all the things that I think are interesting to me and mash them all together with the idea of what readers might find interesting."

Apart from his work on *VOID*, Darrien told us about another project he was involved in. "Last year I took some time away from *VOID* and entered the universal manga contest for *Shonen Jump* with my one shot *Alive*. It's a short 35 page sci-fi manga heavily influenced by *Alien*. We are still waiting on the results from that contest."

If you want to keep up with Darrien online, his Instagram account can be found @akit144, and his Twitter handle is @akitBFPF144. Follow his links there to catch up with *VOID*!



EARTH.
SECTOR A.
YEAR: 2075





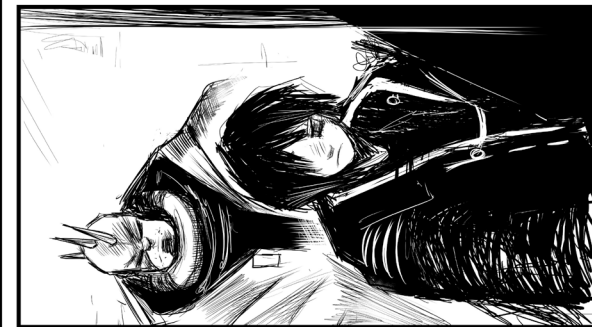
AFTER A MONTH OF
FOLLOWING DEAD ENDS AND
POINTLESS LEADS I'M AT MY WIT'S END.



YOU SEE, THIS CITY IS A MONSTER.



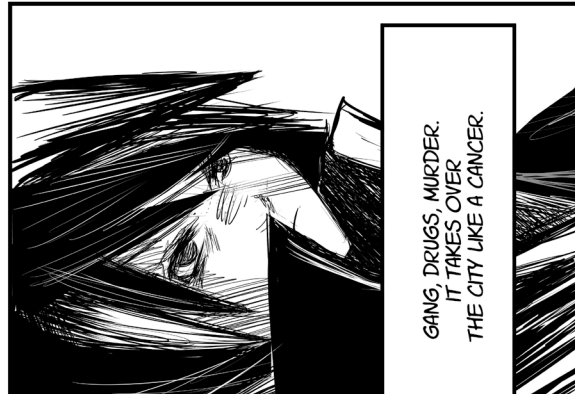
THE CITY REMAINS
DARK EVEN WITH
THE EVER FLOWING
COLOUR OF NEON LIGHTS.



IF THIS ONE
IS A DUD I DON'T KNOW
WHAT I'LL DO.



PEOPLE LIKE ME
ARE TRYING TO CURE IT.



GANG, DRUGS, MURDER.
IT TAKES OVER
THE CITY LIKE A CANCER.





THAT'S IT



I'M LOOKING FOR SOMETHING.

2 THINGS, IN FACT.



THE JUNK IN YOUR POCKET.

AND WHO ARE YOU DEALING FOR.



KATK!!



YOUR RAP SHEET SAYS YOU HAVE BEEN DEALING TO MINORS.

THIS CITY HAS ENOUGH PROBLEMS AND LIKE YOU ARE MAKING IT WORSE, TALK.



YOU GOT SOMETHING I'M LOOKING FOR CREEP.



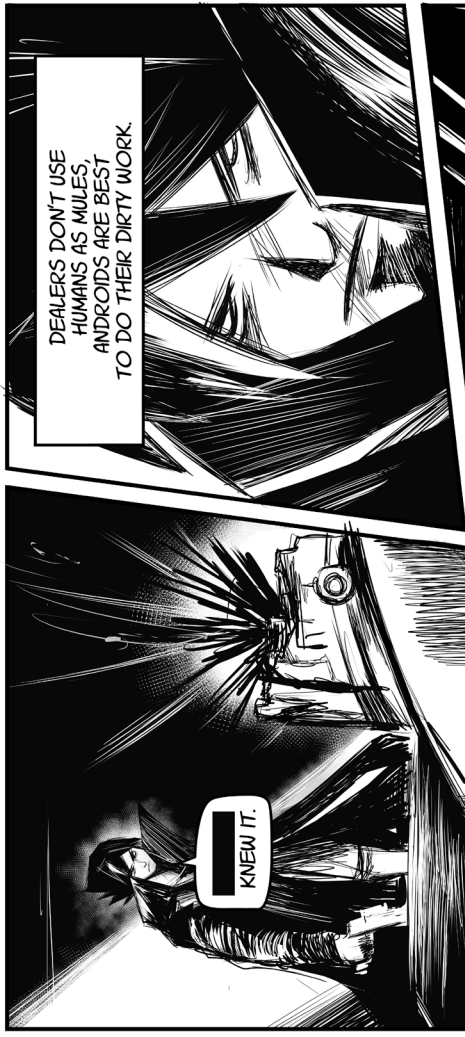
IS THAT RIGHT?

YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU'RE DEALIN WITH, I AIN'T SAYING TO YOU.



YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO KILL BE BEFORE I SPILL.

FINE.



DEALERS DON'T USE HUMANS AS MULES, ANDROIDS ARE BEST TO DO THEIR DIRTY WORK.



IT'S ALWAYS HARD TO PULL INFO OUT OF DROIDS, ESPECIALLY ONES PROGRAMMED TO DEAL OR WORK UNDERGROUND.

THEIR CPU IS PROGRAMMED TO MONITOR THEIR CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIONS. IF THEY ARE HARD PRESSED TOO MUCH ITS SHUT DOWN IS ITS NATURAL RESPONSE.



YOU SEE WHERE THE OTHER GUY WENT?

HE'S GONE.



I GUESS YOU CAN SAY ANDROID SUICIDE.

TO BE CONTINUED IN VOID

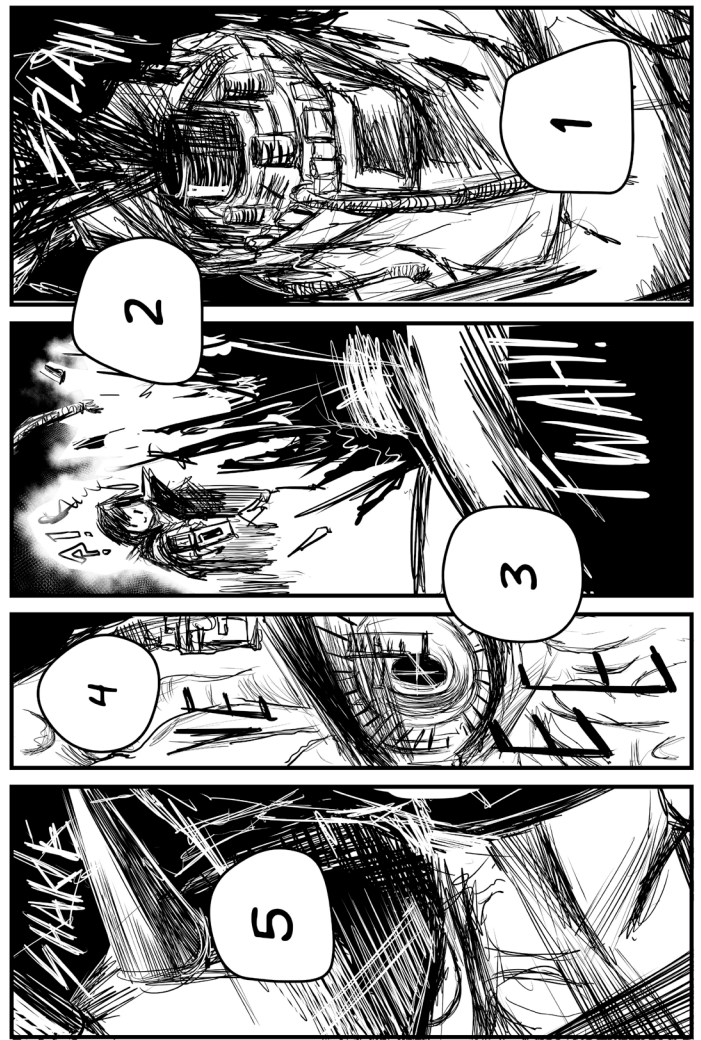


I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY, WE CAN MAKE THIS EASY OR DIFFICULT.



HOW'S THAT SOUND?

I'LL GIVE YOU, SAY? FIVE SECONDS?



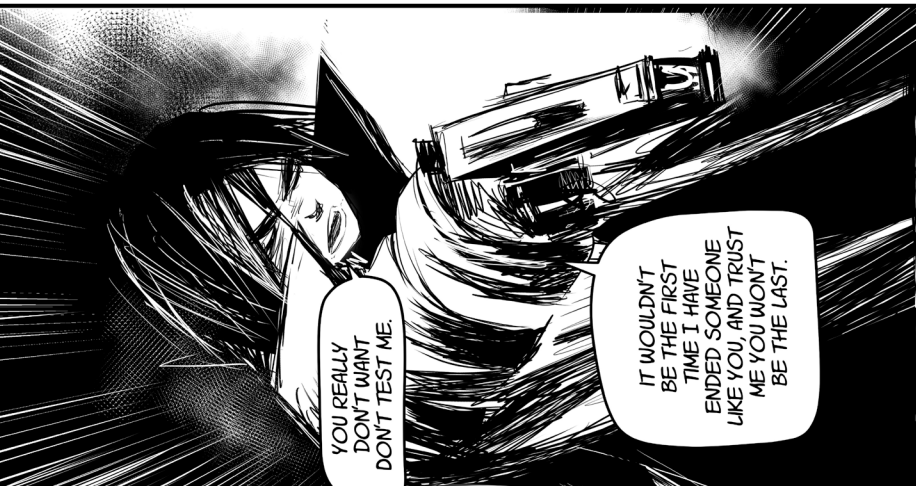
1

2

3

4

5



YOU REALLY DON'T WANT DON'T TEST ME.

IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME I HAVE ENDED SOMEONE LIKE YOU, AND TRUST ME YOU WON'T BE THE LAST.

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BLAZBLUE CROSS TAG BATTLE

BlazBlue is back, and this time it's not alone! Having gathered some of the strongest combatants in the world of fighting games, *Cross Tag Battle* looks set to reinvigorate the genre.

NEO's Jacob Boniface sizes up the new game and some of its contenders...



FULL TEAM AHEAD!

While the game will release with just half of Team RWBY – the protagonist Ruby Red and Weiss Schnee – keep an eye out for updates to the roster, as their teammates Blake Belladonna and Yang Xiao Long will soon be entering the fray as free downloadable content, bringing the team back up to full strength!

About ten years ago, the world of fighting games had arguably hit something of a slump. The big-name franchises were the only ones to release new entries into the genre now and again, and there was seemingly no room for any newcomers to enter the ring. However, that all changed with the release of *BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger* onto the scene! A loud, explosive, and bombastic old-school style fighter, *BlazBlue* was simultaneously a breath of fresh air and a nostalgic thrill ride – utilising classic 2D graphics and retro stylings in an era when fighting games were shifting ever more towards 3D character models and gameplay mechanics. Taking on returning titan *Street Fighter IV*, which came out in the same year, *BlazBlue* still managed to hold its own and make waves with both critics and gamers alike, closing in on the top of the charts upon its initial release in Japan.

ARCSYS RULES

Over the years, the *BlazBlue* franchise has gone from strength to strength, with developer Arc System Works – also known as ArcSys – overseeing more than a dozen games in the series, including a handful of mainline titles, spin-offs, and updated remasters! Not only is *BlazBlue* now a relatively new but strong challenger for the fighting game crown, the series has grown to include visual novel side-stories, as well as manga and light novels that both adapt and expand the series' lore and elaborate world building.

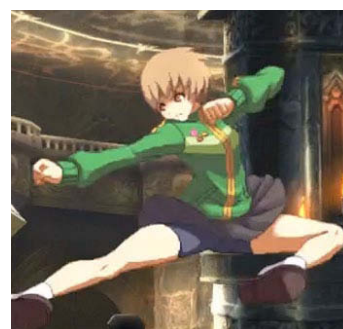
Indeed, one of the things the series has been the most highly praised for over the years is its storyline. A deep and intricate shonen-style adventure filled with magic, revenge, and action, *BlazBlue*'s non-linear plot has definitely proven itself amongst its peers, and even rivals some of the most ambitious anime series out there. Fans clamour for the next

installment of the series as much to see what new developments will be revealed for their favourite characters as for the fresh gameplay and updated graphics.

The main core of the series follows Ragna The Bloodedge, a brooding hero whose tragic past, and the supernatural powers gained therein, leave him no choice but to seek revenge against the clandestine organisation NOL for the abduction of his siblings (not to mention also slicing off his arm and leaving him for dead). However, the series' story branches off throughout side-stories and spin-offs, weaving a twisting tale of clones, mystical superweapons, and even the odd spot of time travel, just to make things extra confusing! And of course, like all fighting games, every entry in the series allows players to take on all comers as a variety of weird and wild characters, be they heroes, villains, or somewhere in between, to provide different viewpoints, or even differing outcomes, on the latest chapter of the *BlazBlue* saga.

However, this latest game in the franchise, the soon to be released *Cross Tag Battle* (due 22 June from PQube on PS4, Steam and Nintendo Switch), mixes things up even more on the character front, incorporating not just some of the favourite characters from *BlazBlue*'s storied history, but also fan favourites from other fighting games *Under Night In-Birth* and *Persona 4 Arena*, as well as featuring animated series *RWBY*'s eponymous team of monster-slaying heroines! Both of the other brawlers chosen have a connection to *BlazBlue*'s developer, Arc System Works – as the co-developer of *Persona 4 Arena*, and publisher of *Under Night In-Birth*, the games were obvious choices to add to this brand new multiversal melee!

Most gamers will definitely be familiar with the *Persona* series of RPGs, but a lot of you out there might be less familiar with the franchise's spin-off titles, specifically their foray



TAGGING RIGHTS!

In a first for the series, *Cross Tag Battle* will feature two-on-two battles, a mechanic that many other fighting games have enjoyed in the past, with players able to switch between fighters at will – so you'll never be stuck deciding which character to choose again!



into the world of fighting games, with 2012's *Persona 4 Arena*. While definitely a departure from their earlier works, *P4A*, as it became known, was nevertheless extremely popular with old fans and newcomers to the series, as ArcSys wove characters from both *Persona 3* and *4* seamlessly into their tried-and-true game engine. The game featured a brand new story that continued the phantasmagorical feats of Nakamura and his friends, in addition to adding new characters that would go on to become as much a part of the *Persona* universe as even the most beloved characters!

But *Persona 4 Arena* wasn't the only fighting game to take 2012 by storm, as another cult hit, *Under Night In-Birth*, took the genre by storm in the same year. While it might not have had the same mainstream recognition as *P4A* with its popular predecessors, *Under Night In-Birth* soon garnered itself a devoted fanbase within the fighting game community.

The game was co-created by studios Ecole Software and French-Bread – who began life as a doujin circle before rising

to prominence with the release of another cult smash *Melty Blood*, a critically acclaimed hybrid of fighting games and visual novels.

While *Under Night In-Birth* was purely an arcade release for some time, ArcSys would later bring it to consoles all around the world, and now to *Cross Tag Battle*, to test its characters' mettle against some of their own!

COMPLETING THE ROSTER

And last but not least, are the girls of team RWBY, from Rooster Teeth's hit animated series of the same name. While their inclusion was definitely a surprise to both fans of the series and the fighting game community, it soon became apparent that with their flamboyant weaponry, rapid-fire attacks, and magical moxie, team RWBY would fit right in with all the combatants that had already been added to *Cross Tag Battle*. Take a look at the coming pages to check out just a few of those ferocious and fearsome fighters... >>>

WHO'S WHO?



RAGNA FROM BLAZBLUE

Ragna, cheerfully known as 'The Bloodedge' or 'The Grim Reaper', is the protagonist of the *Blazblue* series, as you might have guessed from his classic shonen hero hair and oversized sword. A rage-filled rebel, Ragna's sole purpose in life is to protect those few people he cares about – usually by diving into battle after battle. As his rough around the edges personality might indicate, Ragna's fighting style is similarly rambunctious, coupling reckless swings of his massive sword with devastating magical attacks from the Azure Grimoire, a rare and powerful arcane artifact housed in his right arm.

RUBY FROM RWBY

Ruby might well be a familiar face to lots of anime fans – the heroine of the anime-influenced animation series *RWBY*, Ruby is famous for taking the lead in the blisteringly fast-paced action scenes that the series is known for. The series takes place in a fantasy world wracked with conflict between the shadowy Creatures of Grimm and the Hunters, of whom Ruby is a trainee at the prestigious Beacon Academy. Her agile attacks and spinning scythe techniques have kept her alive so far, but how will she measure up against the toughest fighters of multiple universes?

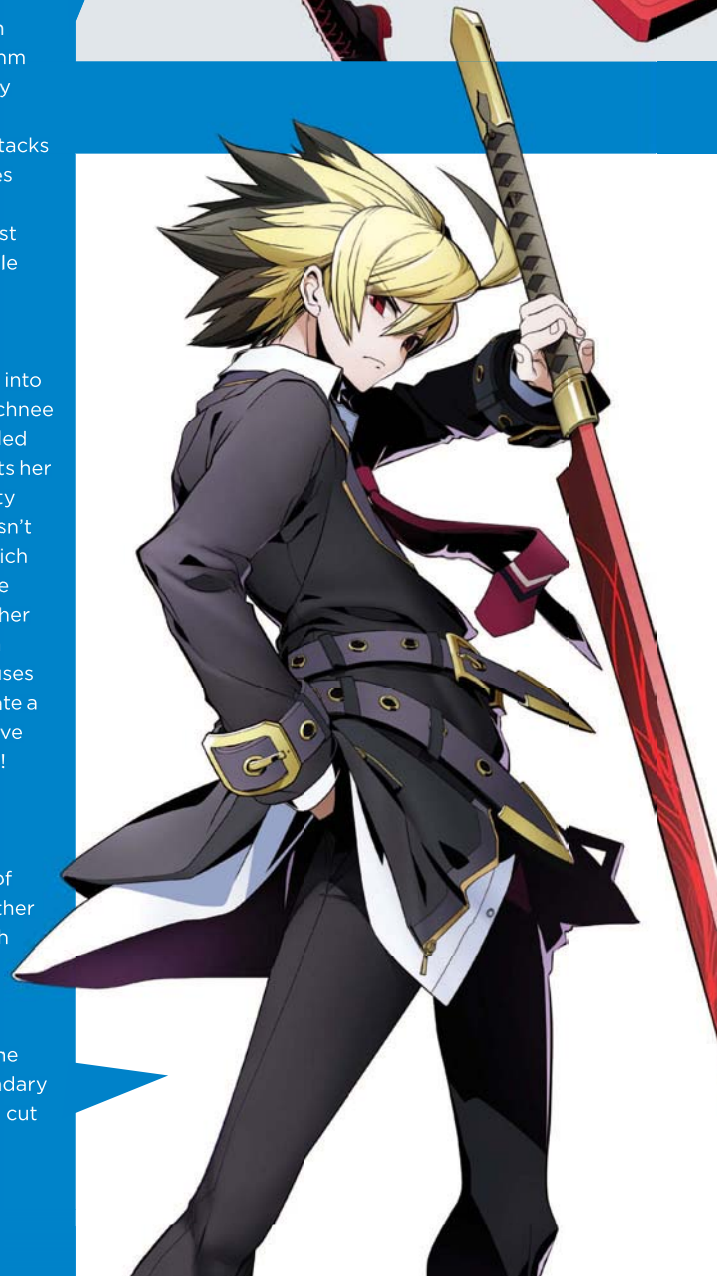
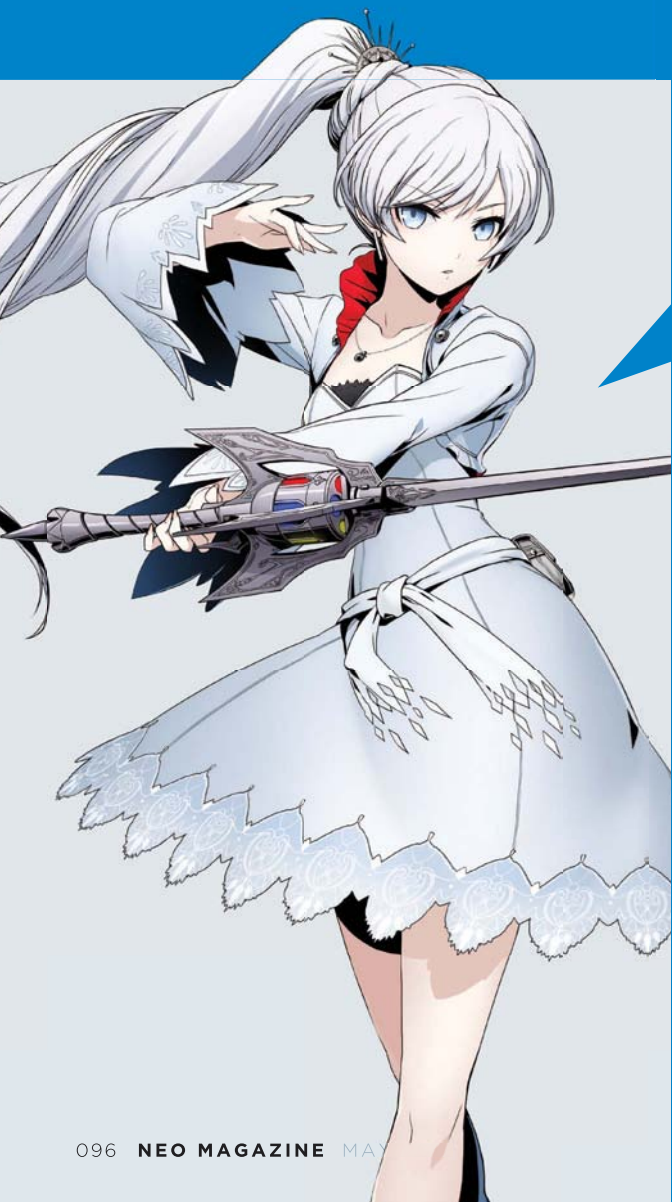


WEISS FROM RWBY

While Ruby is throwing herself into supernatural scrapes, Weiss Schnee represents the more cool headed quarter of team RWBY, as befits her icy demeanour and high society background. However, Weiss isn't just some spoiled princess, which she's more than happy to prove to anyone who gets in her – or her teammates' – way, usually with her Myrtenaster, a rapier that uses salvos of magical dust to create a variety of effects, from explosive flames to gusts of arcane wind!

HYDE FROM UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH

Hyde Kido is the protagonist of *Under Night In-Birth*, and another character who's no slouch with a sword, having trained at a kendo dojo since his youth. An encounter with a demonic entity leads to Hyde gaining the power of the Insulator, a legendary blade that is said to be able to cut through existence itself!



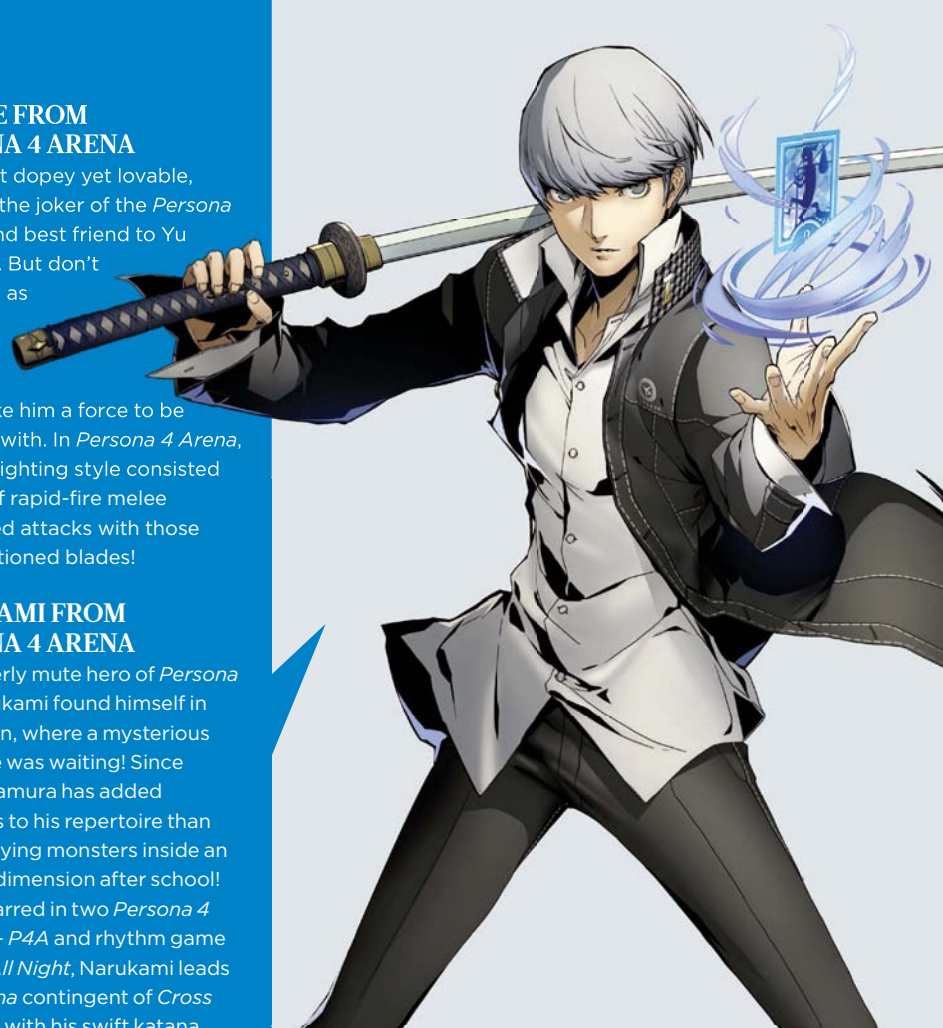


YOSUKE FROM PERSONA 4 ARENA

Somewhat dopey yet lovable, Yosuke is the joker of the *Persona* 4 team, and best friend to Yu Narukami. But don't be fooled, as Yosuke's skills with his twin kunai make him a force to be reckoned with. In *Persona 4 Arena*, Yosuke's fighting style consisted of a mix of rapid-fire melee and ranged attacks with those aforementioned blades!

NARUKAMI FROM PERSONA 4 ARENA

The formerly mute hero of *Persona* 4, Yu Narukami found himself in a new town, where a mysterious adventure was waiting! Since then, Nakamura has added more skills to his repertoire than merely slaying monsters inside an alternate dimension after school! Having starred in two *Persona* 4 spin-offs - *P4A* and rhythm game *Dancing All Night*, Narukami leads the *Persona* contingent of *Cross Tag Battle* with his swift katana strikes and fancy footwork - not to mention the menacing presence of his persona spirit, Izanagi!

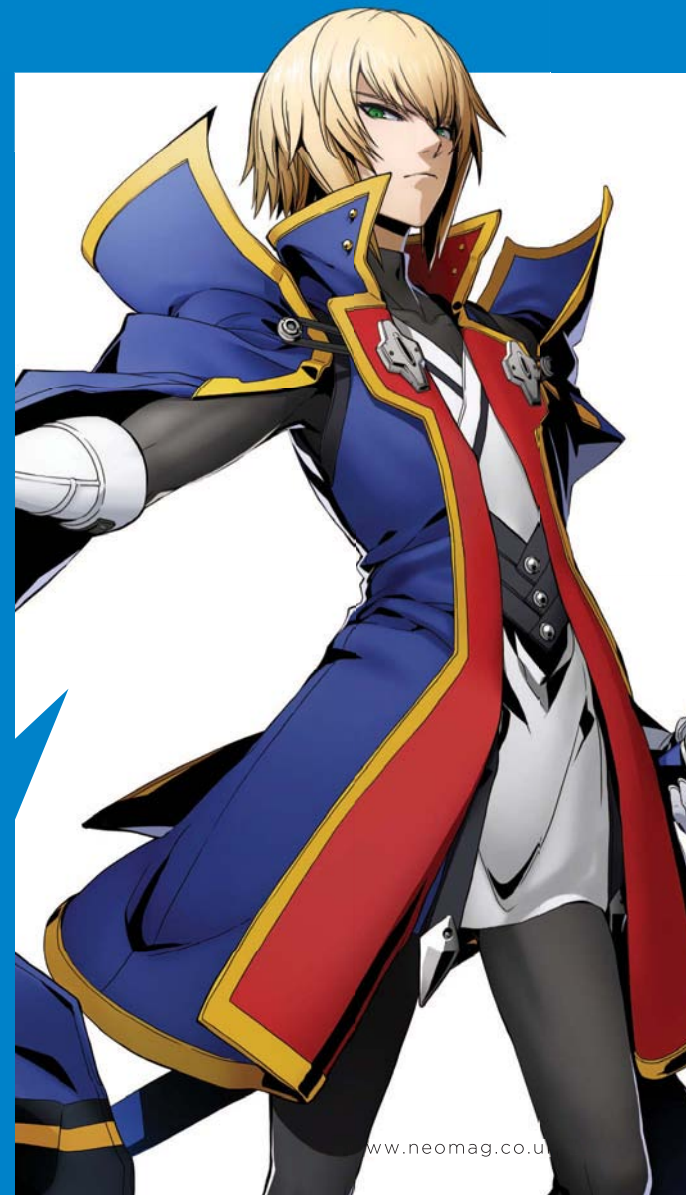


WALDSTEIN FROM UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH

An old - but still fiendishly powerful - man who acts as Linne's bodyguard and companion, Waldstein's superpowered strength allows him to wield his unique weapon, known as 'Iron Claws: The Destroyers'. However, Waldstein's gruff and monstrous exterior belies a softer side - as he cares deeply about Linne, and refuses to leave her side as they both search for a way to put an end to her supernatural curse.

JIN FROM BLAZBLUE

Jin Kisaragi looks every bit the noble knight that his title - 'The Hero of Ikaruga' - would have you believe. However, unlike his brother, Ragna, Jin is coldhearted, cruel, and lives only for the glory of the NOL Organisation - the military force responsible for his childhood kidnapping - and won't hesitate to kill anyone who makes themselves an obstacle to their goals, even his estranged sibling! While this is bad for inhabitants of the world of *BlazBlue*, it's good for players, as Jin is a fierce competitor!



WHO'S WHO?

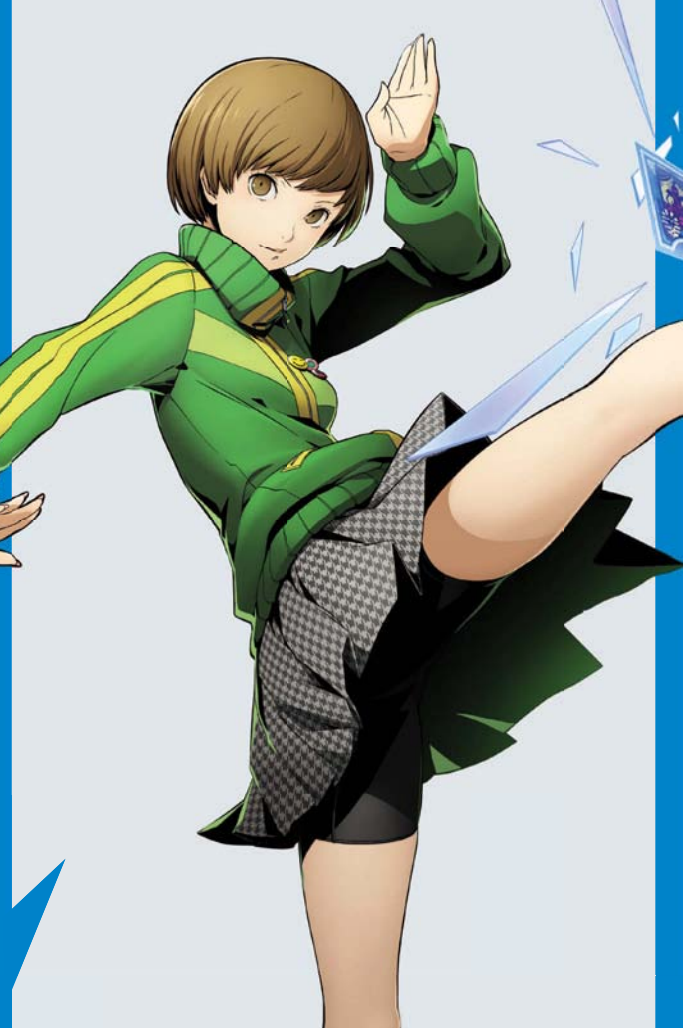


LINNE FROM UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH

Under Night's Linne is the mysterious youth that leads Hyde down his path towards demon slaying and unending combat. While she looks like an ordinary teenager, Linne is actually an immortal being many centuries old. While many would consider such a condition to be a dream come true, Linne is sick of being trapped in the cycle of reincarnation, and seeks a legendary sword that could kill even her...

CHIE FROM PERSONA 4 ARENA

Chie Satonaka might turn her nose up at some of these other characters with their fancy pants swords and magic weaponry – all she needs to take down the enemy is a few good kicks to the face! Despite her outward confidence, Chie has a deep-seated inferiority complex which almost proved to be her downfall during the events of *Persona 4*. But with her friends, her fists, and Tomoe – her equally rough and tough persona spirit – at her side, she's all but unstoppable!



AZRAEL FROM BLAZBLUE

One of the many villains that inhabit the *BlazBlue* saga, Azrael likes nothing more than taking on one super-strong opponent after another. Naturally, it isn't long before Ragna is the next one on his extremely long hit list! With such snappy monikers as 'The Mad Dog', and 'The One Who Carries The Death', Azrael is definitely a match for the spiky-haired hero, or indeed, for any of the *Cross Tag Battle* roster! With some devastating combos in terms of both power and reach, Azrael is definitely among the most menacing characters the game has to offer...

GORDEAU FROM UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH

The seemingly lackadaisical Gordeau leads a double life – a bartender during the days, and a supernatural mercenary at night! However, his carefree ways are merely a front, and anyone who gets too close will get a nasty surprise, in the form of the soul-sucking claws on his right hand. As if that wasn't bad enough, Gordeau also wields a magic sickle that he can use to rake opponents nearer, within range of his demonic attacks.





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